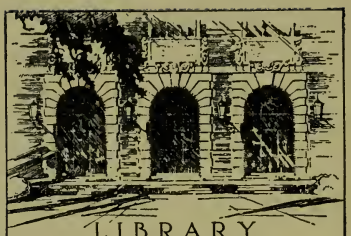
THE WEAKER VESSEL

D. CHRISTIE MURRAY



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BY

D. CHRISTIE MURRAY

AUTHOR OF 'JOSEPH'S COAT,' 'RAINBOW GOLD,' 'AUNT RACHEL,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLS.

VOL. III.

London

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CHAPTER XXIX

I HAD no difficulty in escaping from the light duties of my office, and at noon on the following day I sought out Lady Worborough at the address her husband had given me. Judging from the upholsterer's bills I had seen she had begun the furnishing of a house, but she was for the time being residing in an hotel; a quiet, solid, old-fashioned, and expensive house, of which I could only remember to have heard that it was commonly used by a very distinguished person in my own part of the country on his rare visits to town. It had the severest sort of aspect when I reached it, and the solemn old butler who came forward to inquire my business

would have been at home in the establishment of a bishop. I gave him my card and asked for Lady Worborough. A little to my surprise he showed me upstairs without inquiry, and conducted me into the antechamber of what turned out to be a splendid suite of rooms, very large, very solemn and lonely looking. Here he left me for a moment to look about me and passed into a room beyond. He came back after a very little time.

'Lady Worborough will receive you, sir,' he said. 'Will you be so good as to walk this way, sir?'

He led me through a room much longer than the first, into an apartment where a table had been laid for breakfast. The breakfast paraphernalia was still there, in some disorder, and beyond the table stood a gaunt woman, something over middle age, of unmistakably French aspect. She had almost a dragoon-looking moustache, and her tall, spare figure was rigorously embraced by a tight-fitting bodice of dull black silk. Her

cuffs and collar were of a gentlemanly pattern, and her black, waveless hair was parted on one side. For a mere second on beholding her I was uncertain of her sex.

'Will monsieur give himself the trouble to be seated?' she said, addressing me in French. 'Madame la Comtesse will be here immediately.'

She sat down in a military attitude, and I took the chair her gaunt finger had indicated. The elderly butler retired, closing the door behind him, and we sat in a chill, prim silence for perhaps five minutes. The lady smoothed her cuffs and her moustache, and looked at me uncompromisingly, as though she were a military person who carried a cartel of defiance. At last the door opened, and Lady Worborough swept upon the scene for all the world as if the footlights had gleamed before her. She was attired in a gorgeous dressing-gown of scarlet silk and black lace, and she wore white lace at the throat and wrists. The door had been

thrown open for her by some person out of my range of sight, and was closed behind her as she entered. She threw the skirts of her dressing-gown about her feet, and stood posed for a second or two, as if waiting applause. Then she inclined her head to me, and made a motion with her hand to her companion, who obediently placed a chair behind her. She sank into this and settled herself leisurely, with the same stagy exaggeration of common manners which had marked her entrance. With all this sorrowful affectation there was no abatement in the bitter and disdainful hauteur of her look, and whenever, in the slow, purposed stage majesty of her movements, her eyes encountered mine, they glided away with the old, insufferable hate and pride.

'To what,' she asked me, 'am I indebted for the honour of this visit?'

'I am afraid,' I responded, 'that I cannot speak of the business which brings me here in the presence of a third person.'

'Madame Surel does not understand a word of English,' she said, with a sort of scorn and impatience in her tone, as if she had expected me to know this. 'You may tell me your business and begone.'

'I will not detain you,' I answered, 'a moment longer than is necessary.'

'You detain me unnecessarily in saying so,' she answered. 'Let us have no flourishes. Say what you have to say, and go.'

Thus exhorted, I made myself as brief as possible.

'I am here, Lady Worborough, as your husband's messenger.' At this first mention of her title I saw the first touch of complacency I had ever seen upon her features. She repressed it instantly, and looked, if possible, more proud and self-disdainful than before. 'He desires me,' I continued, 'to lay a proposal before you which he hopes may close all contest between you and him. On his side he is willing to pay to you during your lifetime a sum of five thousand pounds

per annum, and on your side he asks an undertaking that you will leave England, and that you will not in any way molest him. He will pay the debts you have incurred until now, and will make over to you all properties you may have acquired in making them. But he will be answerable for nothing further.'

If I had seen the faintest hope of succeeding by persuasion, if I had been tempted by any little fancy that she could have been touched by appeal or reason, I would have taken another tone, and have chosen other words. As it was, I simply laid my message before her drily, and kept all feeling out of it.

'You will tell Lord Worborough,' she said, 'that I reject his contemptible offer with the scorn it merits.'

'I am instructed,' I returned, 'to say that no other offer will be made, and that in case of the refusal of the conditions now proposed to you, Lord Worborough will feel compelled to leave England——'

'And leave me,' she interjected, 'to my own devices? I know what to expect from Lord Worborough. It will be quite as well that Lord Worborough should know what to expect from me. You bring me his ultimatum. You may carry back mine. I will take nothing less than the position which is justly due to me.'

I asked her to define that position.

'Since Lord Worborough decides to live apart from me,' she answered, 'and since I would on no grounds consent to hold any avoidable intercourse with Lord Worborough, I claim that my solicitor and his shall meet to ascertain the amount of his yearly income, and that it shall be strictly halved between us. I claim to live in England if I choose, and to spend half the year at Worborough Court and half the year in my house in town. I claim at such times to invite whom I please.'

It was not with the slightest hope of reasoning with her, or bringing her to see her

own side smaller than she saw it by the light of nature, but out of pure curiosity to know how far her contemptuous disregard of others would carry her, that I asked where Lord Worborough was to live. She raised her eyebrows with a theatrical pretence of indifferent astonishment.

'What is it to me where Lord Worborough lives, or where Lord Worborough dies? If Lord Worborough should cease to live I shall have my claim upon the estate.'

I hastened to close the interview.

'The agreement of which I have spoken will be drawn up by Lord Worborough's lawyer at once, and submitted to your ladyship.'

'Lord Worborough's solicitor may save himself the trouble of drawing up any such document. If it is submitted to me I shall put it in the fire.'

'That is your last word upon the matter, madam?'

'That is my last word upon the matter, sir.'

I rose and turned to go, but recollected that I had not delivered the whole of the message entrusted to me.

'I am to say,' I added, pausing half-way to the door, 'that an advertisement will appear to-morrow morning in every London daily journal to the effect that Lord Worborough will not hold himself responsible for any debt whatever contracted in his name. He will make arrangements with his men of business for cash payment in respect of everything that may be required by them, will abolish his own personal banking account, and draw solely upon his steward.'

She turned a little pale at this, and I thought that I had made an impression upon her. I waited in silence for a considerable time, but she gave me no answer. Her hands, which I noticed for the first time, were glittering with heavy and valuable-looking rings, clutched at the scarlet silk of her dressing-gown with precisely such an exaggerated motion of anger as an

actress would have employed upon the scene.

'Permit me, Lady Worborough,' I said. 'There is no desire to be harsh or overbearing. The offer I am empowered to make is generous, and no court of law in the world will find it inadequate to your position. The offer will never be withdrawn upon your husband's side, and upon signature of the document I have named you will be able at any time to realise the allowance made to you. But no further offer will be made, and no penny will be paid until the document is signed.'

'Very well, sir,' she answered, 'you have my answer, and you may go. I will starve in the streets rather than accept this wretched pittance.'

She rose to her feet, and strode to and fro about the room, swinging her trailing gown about her as she turned, with a hand obviously trained and skilful. The old sense I had of her having rehearsed the scene

came back upon me, and I could see that she had, in her own fierce, self-hating way, a relish and enjoyment for the airs she practised and the tones she used.

'And who are you?' she cried, pausing suddenly in a statuesque attitude, with both hands drawn backward clutching her robe and her chin high in the air. 'Who are you who dare to come here to insult me with this infamous message? You, my husband's hanger-on and toady, who owe the bread you eat to the generosity of Lord Worborough.'

'That, madam,' I answered, 'is no part of the question I was empowered to discuss. I have the honour to wish you a good day.'

She flashed between me and the door in an instant, setting her back against it with simulated pantings of rage and scorn, and eyes wide open. All the airs were simulated, but there was evidently a real passion behind them. Pole had told me something, though not much, of the manner of her rages, and I began to see that I was fated to witness at

least one of them. She rated me at first with a slow and measured tone, which gradually increased in volume and rapidity, until it grew to an inarticulate shriek. She tore the laces from her neck and wrists, and rent them with teeth and fingers into fragments. Whatever pretence she had begun with she had got past her own guardianship by this time, and was embarked upon the full tide of a mad hysteria. The gaunt female who acted as her companion seemed accustomed to this display. She marched quietly and with a determined air to her mistress, and then moving suddenly behind her, pinioned her elbows, and, in spite of her raging resistance, drew her from the door.

'Allez vous en!' she said to me in one of the pauses of the mad, screaming voice.

I needed no second bidding, but slipped out hastily, closing the door behind me. In the next apartment the wild cries sounded almost as fiercely in my ears as they had done at first. I closed a second door and

they were fainter; a third, and they were barely audible. I could still hear them, or fancied that I heard them, in the hall; but the solemn old butler, who may, for all I can tell, have been a little hard of hearing, gave no sign, but opened the door and bowed me out upon the street with an unaltered gravity of politeness. I had not arranged to meet Pole again until the evening, but, according to agreement, I made my way to his solicitor, and gave him instructions for the preparation of the document. He promised, under pressure, that it should be ready for delivery on the morrow; and I returned to my own duties, such as they were, and remained in my office till the customary hour of leaving.

If ever Pole had stood in need of justification to my mind, the scene in which I had just taken part would have amply served his turn. As it was, it served only to confirm an opinion already sufficiently fixed and solid.

When we met that evening I told him the result of the interview.

'I expected as much,' he said. 'She will not yield, and I dare not. She must go her own way and dree her weird.'

We drew up between us the advertisement we had decided upon, and sent a commissionaire in a cab to the advertisement offices of the various London papers, and next morning the announcement appeared and was naturally much talked of. Pole lingered in London long enough to complete his instructions to his lawyer and to give directions to his steward. It was decided to close Worborough Court and to leave only the servants absolutely necessary for its preservation from decay; and the unhappy master of the stately old place went abroad again to carry his burden as best he might.

Before he went it was decided that in case of any new movement on the part of Lady Worborough I was to be consulted by the lawyer before action on our side was taken. Pole was going to move about, not knowing

as yet in what direction, and caring as little as he knew.

At our parting he named Mary Delamere of his own accord for the first time since the discovery of his wife's plot. He asked after her health and general welfare with a quiet, sorrowful composure, and I answered him with perfect truth and candour. She suffered, but she suffered very nobly to my thinking, and I told him that he might be sure that in a while she would find a tranquil happiness. That was our good-bye, for the train started as I spoke, and we had time for no more than a final shake-hands.

About a week later I was seated in my office when a messenger announced a visitor. The visitor being ushered in appeared as a sandy-haired and pale-complexioned man of middle age, who had a jaunty manner and an air of humorous enjoyment of things in general, tempered by a habit of respectfulness. He announced himself as coming from Pole's lawyer, and he brought with him a

curious and embarrassing history. Lady Worborough had, it seemed, taken up her quarters at the Court, had taken her companion with her, and had proclaimed her right to stay there. The messenger appeared to find a certain not easily discernible drollery in this history, and smiled outright half a dozen times in telling it. My glance seemed always to quell this unseasonable tendency to mirth on his part, but if I turned from him for a moment it was only to find him inspired once more to a broad grin by the hidden humour of the situation.

'The steward circulated the advertisement, sir, amongst the local tradespeople, but Lady Worborough has so far paid in ready money, and of course nobody has refused to serve her. She doesn't seem to spend much, her ladyship doesn't. She has killed quite a number of the cocks and 'ens in the back premises'—here the broad grin flashed out again, was struggled with, under the influence of my unsympathetic eye, and with

difficulty dismissed—'and we learn, sir, that she has given orders for a dozen pigs to be killed and salted down as if she had made up her mind to stand the siege. Of course it costs her nothing to maintain the servants, because they are on board wages, and are paid regularly by the steward. Mr. Wantage would very much like to know, sir, what, in your opinion, ought to be done under the circumstances.'

I could think of nothing that could be done under the circumstances, but to leave Lady Worborough in possession of the Court, until circumstances compelled her to vacate it. The lawyer, when I came to confer with him, shared in this opinion, but when it came to our ears, as it did later on, that articles of value were being sold, we deemed it our duty to interfere. The dull and stupid contention went on for six months, and then her ladyship, tiring of the business, disappeared. There were occasional paragraphs in the newspapers, by which one learned that the

eccentric Lady Worborough was at Bath, or that the eccentric Lady Worborough was at Scarborough. But by and by these flickered out, and for a full year no intelligence of her doings reached me. I supposed that she was living upon the proceeds of her last raid upon her husband, and I looked forward with certainty to her reappearance when her store should be exhausted.

CHAPTER XXX

In the rear of my house there was a garden, not at all a large affair, for land in that part of town is too expensive to be set apart for anything so unprofitable as mere health and pleasure. It measured eleven yards by eight, and was bordered by a brick wall, into which the smoke of thousands of household fires seemed actually to have entered. When we first took possession of the house this wall looked exceedingly raw and desolate, and there was even a suspicion of squalor about it, which was altogether out of accord with the aristocratic character of the neighbourhood and the magnitude of the rent. But as the spring advanced certain forlorn-looking creepers began to burgeon, and the

bare trees, not only in my own garden, but in the gardens of my neighbours, took a hopeful show of green, and by the time the kindly summer reached us the dingy wall was three-fourths hidden with flowers and foliage, and a screen of live emerald folded round us so completely that by dint of a little imagination we could fancy ourselves in the middle of a country solitude. We had a gaily striped tent erected here, with a boarded and carpeted floor, and there, when my official duties for the day were over, we held revel over five o'clock tea. Sometimes, on very bright mornings, we made the pretence of a picnic, and breakfasted out there, to the particular satisfaction of the page-boy, who adopted the picnic idea more completely than any other member of the household, and decorated his face with London blacks by rolling on the grass behind the tent, out of sight, in the intervals of duty.

It was pleasant, in the summer dusk, to take one's after-dinner coffee and cigar in

this retreat, or to lie upon a rug on the limited scrap of lawn, staring up at the smoke-softened sky, which, in clear and tranquil weather, is more beautiful than the average Londoner seems to know or dream.

It was near dark one evening, after a day of sweltering heat, when I lay thus engaged, thinking in a hazy fashion of many things. Clara and Mary had been seated beside me, talking quietly, and now, perhaps for a quarter of an hour, my wife and I had been alone together. We had not exchanged a word during this time, but I was filled with a pleasant sense of her nearness and companionship, and it has always seemed to me to be a rather poor and thin companionship where people must needs be perpetually talking. It was an understood thing between us, though nobody spoke of it, that a battle was near at hand. In a week or two Mary's promised stay of six months would come to a close, and we knew that though she was far happier with us than she would

have been elsewhere, she would make an effort more or less determined to return to the Sisterhood. Personally I was resolved to make a very determined effort to retain her, and I was the more resolute because I thought I had seen now and again a cloud upon Clara's spirits which I attributed to her fear of the approaching parting.

She sat at the door of the tent, with a book, which it was too dark to read, held laxly in one hand beside her, with a finger between the leaves, still unconsciously marking the page at which she had put it by. I, lying close beside her, within easy hand reach, could see the book and the hand with the wedding-ring upon the finger, but her drooping face, as she seemed to look down upon me, was dark against the shining pallor of the sky. I rolled idly over, and possessing myself of the book, took the little ringed hand in mine, and, to my terror and astonishment, a large, warm tear fell. I rose to my knees and asked what was the matter. I

thought of that possible coming parting, and could imagine nothing else as a cause for tears, but had that been a reason for her grief the answer would have come easily, and here, for a while, I could get no response at all. To find my poor little wife hugging me round the neck with both arms, and weeping in a sort of resolved despair without being able at all to guess the ground of it, was pitiable, and almost terrible.

'What is it, darling?'

'Oh, John! My poor, dear John! What will you do without me?'

Without her? I had no thought or fear of being without her. What did it mean? I asked her over and over again, and for sole answer there were the clinging arms and silent tears, and now and again the little figure shaken by a sob. I insisted, I besought, I prayed her to be brave, and tell me everything. I cudgelled my brains in a troubled bewilderment for any reasonable

explanation of the grief and fear which evidently beset her. At last she told me, crying more and more softly, with her arms about my neck and her flushed wet cheek pressed against mine, that she would not live long, and that it broke her heart to think of leaving me alone.

Not live long? She was in the very pride of health and strength. She had been a little odd and fanciful of late, unreasonably depressed at moments, gayer and brighter than usual sometimes, without apparent reason. But in danger? I know that if there had been any solid fear, my heart, in its natural rebellion against the thought of severance, would have banished it to the latest moment. I could realise that certainty, even then, but I saw no cause for alarm at all, and tried my tenderest best to laugh her out of this singular fantasy. Finding that at least it was no fantasy to her mind, I became aware of a vague terror. I am no more superstitious than the average run of men,

but I remembered all manner of legends of fulfilled presentiment.

I helped her into the house, and having bestowed her in an arm-chair and covered her with unnecessary wraps, I found Mary, and begging her to stay with my wife until my return I ran off in haste for the nearest doctor. Happily for the ending of my anxiety, the nearest doctor chanced to be a man of high repute, and was at home. I told him the nature of my trouble, and he heard the narrative with an inhuman smiling calm, assumed his gloves and hat, and set out with me. He was closeted with his patient for the space of some five minutes, at the end of which time he found me waiting feverishly in the hall. I drew him through the dining-room door, and questioned him. Was there any danger? Was it anything but a feminine fancy?

'My dear sir,' he responded, rubbing his hands and smiling, 'it is a feminine fact. There is not the faintest cause for anxiety,

but ladies in Mrs. Denham's condition are liable to these attacks of despondency. You must do your best to keep her mind upon a level—a level, my good sir.' He described the level in the air with two white, plump hands, stooping a little as he did so, as if to indicate that he would rather have the level a little low down than otherwise. 'Her present condition is everything that could be desired. Positively everything that could be desired. The one thing I should feel disposed to recommend would be that you should find for her, if possible, a discreet, calm-minded, experienced, and affectionate companion of her own sex.'

I dashed instantly at the bell, and rang, not the mad peal I might have rung if I had not suddenly remembered myself, but a modest tinkle, barely audible.

'You know such a lady?' asked the doctor. 'You are about to send for her?'

'She is in the house,' I answered. 'She is thinking of leaving us. My wife is most

tenderly attached to her, and I traced her despondency to that cause. Pray persuade her to stay. You have only to tell her what you have said to me, and I know that she will not dream of leaving us.'

The maid entering the room at this instant, in answer to my summons, I sent a message to Miss Delamere, asking her to come for a minute to the dining-room. When she entered her face brightened at the sight of the doctor, and the doctor's face brightened at the sight of her.

'Sister Constance!' he said, in a tone of great pleasure. 'I think we have found a duty for you. I have just seen Mrs. Denham, who has been alarming her husband by a touch of low spirits and despondency, very natural in her present state. He tells me that this despondency is due to the fear of your departure. Now a fixed despondency, my dear Sister Constance, is a danger in a case like this. We must avoid it if we can.'

As soon as the doctor paused I hastened to say that much as Clara and I had valued her companionship we should be a hundred fold more grateful for it now. I was so urgent in my fear lest Clara's mind should quit that level which the doctor seemed to think desirable for her that she gave way at once. I thanked her with all my heart, and begged her without delay to tell Clara of the promise she had made.

'That,' said the doctor, 'will be her best medicine.' When Mary had gone, in obedience to my request, he added, with a queer kind of brusquerie which I understood better later on, 'I'm glad she's left us, because I wanted to say a word about her. That woman, Mr. Denham,' laying an impressive hand upon my shoulder, 'is an angel.' He seemed almost angry about it, and looked as if he would have liked me to contradict the statement, but I assented to it warmly. He lingered for a minute or two, while he drew on his gloves, to say that

he had met her often in the pursuit of his professional duties, and had formed a high opinion of her. 'The loftiest, sir,' he said,—'the loftiest,' with the same tone of brusquerie and defiance. With this, he went away, staying only for a minute in the hall to tell me that I was not to trouble him again unless I saw actual need for it.

I was not at all surprised when Mary next morning expressed her delight at my having fallen upon Doctor Mason.

'I think,' she said, 'he is the kindest-hearted creature in the world. People speak of him as one of the hardest-working men in London, but he spends a third of his time in doctoring patients who cannot pay him a penny.'

There are many such men in the ranks of his profession. I remember, when I got to know him intimately, as I did, telling him one day that doctors were the only people in the world who spent their lives in an earnest endeavour to leave themselves nothing to do.

He twinkled over this, and answered, 'My dear sir, we are all engaged in providing work for generations of our successors. We patch up the feeble.' I cornered him directly afterwards by asking whether, if a medical man found a means by which all disease and sickness could be ended, he would make his knowledge public. He thundered, 'By heaven, yes, sir!' but added, 'we can be quite easy on that head. Nobody will ever find it.'

To get back to my story, Mary stayed, and was of infinite use and comfort, as wherever she went she seemed to be. She, at least, seemed to have found the level necessary to a tranquil mind. Her mood could rise sometimes to a gentle gaiety, but if this had any corresponding depression, no one but herself was allowed to know of it. She went about the world in a placid, equable, sweet calm, not sad, and yet with a touch of sadness always in my contemplation of it. Clara recovered her usual courage and good

spirits almost immediately with the certainty of not losing her companion, and though of course her despondencies came back again from time to time she fought an easier battle with them than at first.

Mrs. Grantley and her brother, who was a childless widower, were moving about Switzerland. We heard of them from Basle, from Zurich, from Thun, from Chamounix. There was no knowing at any given moment where they might be. They followed no settled track or plan, but seemed to flit wherever fancy led them. Clara's letter, announcing the coming event, followed them about from place to place for a month, but when once it reached her Mrs. Grantley came flying over with matronly solicitude, and in my own house I became a cipher. It is a fact in arithmetic that if you put any other figure before a cipher that hitherto inexpressive sign takes an immediate value. In household affairs it is not so. I was the cipher, and every other figure in the house, if it

were but clothed in petticoats, was before me. But I acquired no value from this circumstance.

I heard all this while, at considerable intervals only, occasional news of Pole. He had been to the Piræus and to Constantinople; thence he had wandered to the Crimea, to look at the fields over which the fancy of the whole world had hovered a few years before. His letters expressed but little of his feeling, but he woke up somewhat about Inkerman and the Alma, and the empty battered fortress of Sebastopol. Next I heard of him as being bent back for Paris, and in case all should go well at home I promised myself an early meeting with him there. Then a month went by without a word from him, six weeks, two months.

I had kept up a friendly correspondence with MacIlray, and it was from him that I heard my first news, after this pause, of the missing wanderer. It caused me a good deal of anxiety.

'Your friend, Lord Worborough,' wrote MacIlray, 'is back this seven weeks in the capital of sin and foolishness. He is a bright, manly fellow, and unless I am a greater fool than I commonly am, he has plenty of natural, rational lights to guide him. But if half the stories that Paris is ringing with just now are true, he has cut the last tether of reason, and gone astray altogether. He has taken an hotel, and has set it up in a very grand fashion, and he has gathered about him the wickedest, cleverest crowd in all the city. He is not the lad to go to the mischief with fools for his companions. His heart's in the right place still, I'm thinking, and I'll tell you a very characteristic thing of him, though I must not be held as expressing my approval of the expenditure of money so gotten in a holy cause. The facts of the case are these, and I have taken the pains to ascertain that they are facts before writing them. There's a certain blackguard here who's called the Marquis de St. Marci, who's no less than a

fiend with the cards and dice and other such like tools of evil. He's a man of great wealth, as rich, they say, as Lord Worborough himself. The two sat down together this night week, and played so high that Worborough won from the other body two hundred and seventy-five thousand francs. If you'll put this into English money, you'll find that, bar the loss on the rate of exchange, its total is eleven thousand English pounds sterling. They played till noon, and then the Marquis gave it up. Lord Worborough distributed the money amongst five Parisian charities next day. There's a saying in my part of the world that what's got over the devil's back is spent under his belly, and though I'm far from arguing, as I'm sure you know, that the money had better have been put to base uses, I have a feeling that it's out of accordance with the general fitness of things that a sum so acquired should be spent in such a fashion.'

I knew something of this Marquis de St.

Marci, and was strongly of opinion that any money which found its way from his exchequer to that of a charitable organisation had changed hands with advantage to the world at large. I was sorry to hear of him as being one of Pole's companions, but I could hardly believe that the connection was likely to last long or to be familiar. MacIlray's code of morals was of the strictest old-fashioned Scottish sort, and I knew so well that many things condoned by the world at large would seem wicked in his eyes, that I was able to make considerable deductions from his story of Pole's wildness. The news of this gambling feat of his disturbed me profoundly, however, though in my love for him and my knowledge of his circumstances I was quick to find excuses. The spoiled life, in which it was so easy for him to fancy that every avenue to happiness was closed, the great wealth suddenly acquired, the rebound of spirit and enterprise natural to his years, all made apology for him. I fancied him grown

desperate and seeking distraction from the emptiness of his own soul in these questionable ways. I found some comfort in the reflection that whithersoever his troubles might drive him he could never cease to be a gentleman, and an English gentleman to boot. The English gentleman's creed is sometimes a little heathen, but it saves him from a good many things which the creed of people otherwise bred and nurtured inspire no repulsion for.

I had my own anxieties, and for a time at least they were urgent enough to drive even Pole's affairs from my mind, but in the end all went happily, and my establishment was increased in strength by one. The addition to the garrison was an addition to the majority, for the baby was a girl. She is now, unless my fatherly partiality deceives me, a very charming and beautiful young woman, of the perter order of beauty. Having defended myself beforehand by this statement, I may be held excused for saying that

I was disappointed, and even shocked, by her earliest aspect. I had been interested in most things which had come into my sphere of observation, but I had never before found any real and inviting opportunity of becoming interested in a baby. Her complexion struck me as being far too florid. I had doubts which were almost tragic as to the future of her nose. The darkling scowl she cast upon me at our first interview lingered on my memory for hours. I never dared to mention my misgivings, but the chorus of approval raised by the whole feminine contingent sounded in my ears like the hollowest of mockeries. I examined, I criticised, I inquired within myself; faintly, I dared to hope. But, whilst grandmamma—the world, I think, never held a prouder, or one more conscious of her dignity—proclaimed with sparkling eyes and heightened colour that the baby was the living image of her mother, and when the mother, with a certainty of faith no doubt could have shaken,

cried aloud her discovery in that terra-cotta-coloured scowl of a resemblance to me, I felt that both my wife and myself were humiliated and maligned.

There are few things in the world which introduce themselves with so little promise to the masculine mind as a baby. But is there anything else in the world which so quickly knits itself about the heart? I can give voice to my misgivings now without shame, because I know them to be common to my sex. At that time I hid them, because I honestly thought that I was a fiend among fathers, a creature denaturalised, and void of the insight of affection.

The Sister Superior from that little, half-conventual establishment off the Strand, had been several times to see us. She came one special Saturday afternoon, when by rare hazard Mary was absent from her ordinary duties amongst the poor. Clara, a little fatigued by a morning drive, had gone upstairs to rest, and Mary was nursing the

younger Clara, by this time between two and three months old, when the Sister Superior was announced. I was looking on —I dare say with a very visible fatherly complacency, for by this time the terra-cotta complexion had changed to a delicate pinky white, and the scowl had given place to the most innocent and engaging expression—when the motherly lady entered. Baby was crowing and gurgling in an inarticulate ecstasy about something or other which neither of us could understand, and Mary was bending over her like some mild Madonna in a picture, with a smile so tender and innocent and radiant that it fitly matched even the infantine beauty of the child.

The motherly Sister Superior gurgled at the baby, and stooped to kiss it. When she raised her head she kissed the nurse, and putting a plump, withered hand on either cheek, looked at her affectionately, and said—

'This is your place, my dear.'

CHAPTER XXXI

When the following August brought the second of my annual vacations, my whole household uprooted itself, grandmamma, mother, and baby, with all their inevitable belongings, and started off for Switzerland. Clara and I had spent an infinity of argument on Mary, and had at length succeeded in persuading her to accompany us. In old days she had travelled a good deal with her father, but he had led her chiefly to those places which were of interest to himself, and she had never seen the Alps. It was one of the dreams of her life to see Mont Blanc, but she would have resisted our invitations to the last if we had not found an ally in Dr. Mason, who insisted that a holiday was

necessary to her. On her visits amongst the poor she still wore her half-conventual garb, but she had long since set it aside for ordinary occasions.

We made our first halt in Paris, and my wife naturally knew well enough that I meant to call upon Pole there. Neither she nor Mary made any allusion to him in my hearing, and when, on the day after our arrival, I set out from the hotel alone, no inquiries were made as to my proposed destination. We were staying at an hotel in the Rue de Rivoli, and I had but to cross the Place du Carrousel, to walk a couple of hundred yards to the right, and to cross the river to reach Pole's residence on the Quai d'Orsay. I had written from London, telling him of the day on which I would call, and had expected him to be alone to receive me. I found him entertaining a dozen gentlemen at breakfast, but he jumped up from his seat at the head of the table when I was shown into the room, and came forward to meet me

with a genuine friendly warmth. Whilst his face was lit up at the first sight of me, and for a moment or two afterwards, I did not notice the change which had come upon him. But when a seat had been found for me at the table, and he had settled down again, I had time to observe him. There were no actual lines in his face, but, as it were, a preparation for them. His expression in silence was very mournful, and he looked tired, and, as I could not help thinking, cynical. He had always been a fair linguist since I had known him, and now, after his lengthy stay in Paris, he had achieved such an ease and elegance in French as Englishmen rarely attain to. Excepting himself, I was the only Englishman at the table, and I had known beforehand that he associated but little with his countrymen.

The talk was wonderfully bright and light, with now and again a touch of seriousness in it, which, though it was never more than

momentary, served to give it a flavour of reason. The names of most of the guests were familiar to me, and were familiar to everybody who knew anything of art, letters, and politics in Paris. During my own brief journalistic sojourn there I had seen, on first nights of theatrical representations, in famous studios, and in the parliamentary ranks in the Chamber of Representatives, most of the faces which surrounded me, and I was pleased to find myself one of an assembly so distinguished.

The table was spread with a sumptuous refinement, the wines were something to remember, but the talk was the best part of the meal. It was self-conscious and wary, like the dangerous dexterities of a tumbler, but like those same dexterities, it was graceful and assured, and looked so easy as to tempt one to the belief that oneself could do it. It glanced and glittered and posed, and everybody laughed at its pretty, daring, wayward ways; but keeping a watchful eye on my old

friend I could see that below his surface gaiety there was a deep-rooted and constant sadness. He was as keen and ready as any of his guests, but his good things were biting, and at times almost savage. Several times in the course of the breakfast I heard one or other of his cronies allude to him as the pessimist, and that indeed seemed to be his accepted title.

Breakfast over, we adjourned to an apartment in which the arrangement of the furniture struck me at first sight as being curious. The room was large and sumptuous, but from the centre of it every article had been cleared away, with the exception of a small table with a green baize top, and a brace of chairs, which stood one on either side of it. Other chairs there were in plenty, lounges, *causeures*, and what not, but these were all drawn away, as if for the accommodation of a standing gallery round the little green-baize-topped table. Amongst the guests was one man, and one man only, whose

face I misliked. He was handsome, after a Mephistophelian, wicked fashion, but he was prematurely wrinkled and elderly, and looked altogether cruel, cunning, and untrustworthy. I was not long in discovering that this personage was no other than the Marquis de St. Marci. I was not long in discovering either that the whole object of the gathering was to witness a match between the Marquis and Lord Worborough at écarté. Pole, it appeared, had been challenged to a game of three hours' duration at stakes almost unheard of, and, since he had won heavily from his opponent, had accepted the defiance.

Cigars and cigarettes were lit, two men were appointed, one in the interest of each of the players, to mark the score, Pole and his opponent took their seats at the table, and the game began. I made my first acquaintance with écarté that day, and have never followed up the introduction, so that I am unable to describe the play. I suppose it to have been very skilful on both sides, from

the rapt eagerness with which it was watched by the little crowd about the table. There was a noble pendule upon the mantelpiece with a bronze figure, half life-size, poised upon the top of it, and when two o'clock sounded the first deal was made. I did not like the proceedings at all, and, in point of fact, I felt a kind of inward protesting rage against them, but before the game had gone on for a quarter of an hour I was as passionately and eagerly absorbed as any devotee at the shrine of chance there present. At first the run of luck was all in Pole's favour, but the Marquis was as calm and cool as if he had been playing for farthings. Many of the men standing round had little note-books, in which they cast up the results of the game as it progressed. They showed these at intervals with shruggings of the shoulders, lifted eyebrows, and pale, excited smiles to other men who had kept no count. In a mere half-hour the total of Pole's winnings doubled my annual income from all sources.

I do not know whether it is so with all men, but for myself, though I am not, nor ever have been, anything of a gambler, there is an extraordinary fascination in looking on at games of mingled chance and skill. This particular encounter is historical in gaming circles, and, I suppose, it is no wonder that it excited me, even apart from my interest in one of the players. When Pole had a reverse I trembled lest the whole course of events should go against him; when he won I trembled with triumph, and between coup and coup I trembled with excitement. The players sat quiet, like a pair of fates, and were apparently the least moved and interested of all the people there. Only I began to notice a certain strained look about the eyes of Pole's opponent. He had had a clear and rather hectic flush of colour on the cheek when he sat down first at the table, and this flush of colour spread gradually until the under and upper eyelid were charged with it.

He called for new cards at the expiration

of the first half-hour, but they brought him no better fortune than the old. The game still went against him, and though every minute was filled and overfilled with interest, the plaintive voice of the pendule chiming three fell upon my ear long before it was expected. Again the Marquis de St. Marci called for new cards, and still the run of luck went against him. I was beginning to pity him when it turned, and for a clear hour thenceforward he took everything before him at such a pace that the positions of the two began to be reversed, and Pole became a loser. When four o'clock sounded Pole was some twenty thousand francs to the bad, and after that the game fluctuated in brief rushes, each one of which, to my overstrained fancy, seemed likely to lead to final victory and defeat. It became evident at length that Pole was losing beyond all doubt. Allowing for the best possible good fortune in the last half-hour, he could not expect to make his losses good; and when five sounded and

the game was over he rose the loser, in round money, of twelve thousand pounds. It appeared that he had prepared himself for this contingency, for he drew out a cheque-book and wrote a cheque for the amount before rising, and passed it over to the Marquis, who accepted it with smiling thanks, and buttoned it up in his pocket-book.

After this the little assembly of celebrities melted away with great rapidity, and in half an hour Pole and I were left to ourselves. He lit a cigarette, and threw himself upon a sofa with a worn-out air.

'It's a pretty game,' he said laughingly, 'but écarté's like life. No man can play against the cards. I began too well to go on well, and I knew at the end of the first half-hour that I was bound to lose. Win first, lose last. That's as true as anything can be in a world where everybody's predictions are bound, more or less, to be falsified.'

I have confessed already that I had been carried away by my excitement over the

game, and it is quite possible that if Pole's success had continued my interest in it might have endured until the close; but during that last half-hour in which he had been obviously doomed to failure I had found ample time to cool, and I had come back to common-sense, even if, as often happens, I had taken a roundabout way to it. One takes the wrong way to common-sense at times, and gets switched back to it in a surprising fashion. In point of fact, common-sense lives in so many places that even the most errant of travellers can hardly avoid an occasional encounter with her.

'You look severe, John,' said Pole, raising himself on one elbow idly, and regarding me across the little cloud of smoke which had just left his lips. 'You disapprove of these things? You would rather see a man with my income and position engage his fortune in the amelioration of the world at large? Why, so would I; but then, you see,' he went on with an idle bitterness impossible to

describe, 'one develops, as philosophers are teaching us, in the direction where one encounters the least resistance.'

I was somewhat wearied by the excitement of the afternoon, and a little abashed inwardly by the memory of my own share in it, so that for a minute or two I found no heart to answer him. By the time I had recovered myself enough to know what my own honest and natural emotions really were, the time for an answer seemed to have gone by, and I kept silence, though many things occurred to me as being worth the trouble of saying.

At the beginning of the play the sun had shone into the room so brightly that it had been found necessary to draw the curtains as a shield against it. Half-way through the game they had been partly retired again, and now a single broad beam glared upon the pier-glass and its gold border, near the ceiling. The plaintive, silvery voice of the pendule chimed again, and the room seemed to sink into the shadow of the great house which

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stood at the west and to the rear. The last glow of broad day departed from the chamber, and Pole and I were left in a half twilight, which seemed the more obscure because of that lately-vanished blaze.

'I can't see now,' he said, 'whether you look severe or not, but I suppose you feel severe.'

'I feel sorry,' I answered him.

'That,' he responded, 'is a little worse than feeling severe. I'd a great deal rather that you didn't feel sorry about me, Jack. I think, all things considered, it might be happier for you and me if we missed each other altogether, and made up our minds to take different ways.'

I asked him if he thought it likely that we could forget each other if we lived ever so far apart, and, rising from the sofa he was lounging on, he crossed over and took a seat near me. I do not know that it is necessary at any time to analyse memories and emotions, but I know distinctly that his dim

figure lounging across the room at me with his hands in his pockets and his head thrown backwards, the very manner in which he dropped into the chair he chose, and the attitude he took there, reminded me of a time when he and I had both supposed his troubles to be over. I do not think, calling to mind our whole career together, that at any moment in it I had loved him so well or pitied him so profoundly. We are bound nowadays to keep cool, and to hide, even when we cannot choke, our emotions, but if I had followed the instinct of my own heart at that moment I should have put my arms around him and have cried like a child or a woman. As it was I burst into an unreasonable anger. It was my only refuge from myself. But I think he understood me.

'You have no right,' I said, 'to make this kind of thing the occupation of your life.'

'Granted,' he answered. 'So far as I can see one has no right to anything. When the beaten mule has no pleasure left him but to

kick over the traces, and when he always gets beaten for doing it by that angelic monitor which tries to govern mules—eh, Jack, isn't it rather hard for him if his fellow-mule comes to bray reproach at him?'

I understood it all, and told him so.

'It's only the superior intelligence that understands,' he said. 'Don't you think you're a shade too young to be able honestly to take that tone with me?'

I was silent at this, and sat in a sort of sick amazement at it.

'Don't be angry, Jack,' he said suddenly. 'There's a kind of stuff that is purified by many fires. You can't give it too many to burn the dross out of it. But there's another kind of stuff that gets to be all dross if you burn it too long and too often.' We were quiet for a time, and then he asked me, 'Did you ever hear me growl till now? Look here, Jack,' he went on, 'I've looked at it pretty often. What have I got to do? Go and take my seat in the House and make

speeches and make a name? I've thought about it. Turn philanthropic landlord and interest myself in the cause of the tenant farmer and the labourer? I've thought about that too, and I think I make my people pretty easy. But Lady Worborough's in the police court now and then, and I can't show up. I have to hide myself. I have to sing small. I have to exile myself from my own country and the work I would do, if I had the chance to do it.'

'Lady Worborough in the police court?' I cried. 'What do you mean?'

'One comes from home to learn news of home,' he answered bitterly. 'You haven't heard?'

'I have heard nothing,' I answered. 'I have had no news of Lady Worborough for the greater part of a year.'

'You read only the respectable journals,' he responded. 'You don't know the *Flag of Liberty*, the palladium of the people, the weekly sheet which proclaims to its own

public that everybody with a handle to his name is a scoundrel by rule of Magna Charta. I have the advantage of reading an occasional column about her ladyship and myself. The indignant writer demonstrates the fact that I am a personage of the basest extraction, and therefore have a right to be virtuous; but he shows also that I am a lord, and, by accretion of title and income, vicious. He proves the same things of her ladyship, and is eloquent about the closing phrase of the police reports, "The fine was paid." I have a round dozen of printed documents upstairs. I'll show them to you, if you care to see them. I owe them to some anonymous friend of mine, who sends them to me by the earliest post, and sometimes writes beforehand to advise me that they are coming.'

He might, by the sound of his voice, have been talking about the most indifferent theme in the world. Finding that I answered nothing, he arose and strolled out of the room, returning after a brief absence with

what turned out to be a pocket-book in his hand. He threw this upon the table, and told me that if I wanted intelligence of Lady Worborough it was there in plenty. He drew the curtains wide apart, and the room was light again. I took the pocket-book from the table and glanced at its contents—scraps of newspapers of different dates. The merest look was enough, and I returned them.

When you know that a man is as thoroughly persuaded of the folly of his own course as you yourself can be, it is of little use to argue with him. I bethought me of Pole's declaration about the trust in which he held his fortune; but I was certain that he also remembered it, and it would have been gratuitously stupid to remind him of it.

'Since I had to pass through Paris,' I said lamely, 'I couldn't help looking you up.'

'No,' he said; 'I expected you to call.'

There was a change in both of us since the hearty reception at mid-day; but I knew that my own cold unhappiness grew out of

the change in him, and that my presence at the spectacle of his extravagant gambling was answerable for that.

'We are going on to Brussels to-morrow,' I said. 'Clara wants to make a flying call upon some friends there. I suppose we shall see no more of each other for a while?'

'No,' he answered, 'I suppose not. Are you alone, you two?'

I told him that Miss Delamere was with us, and Mrs. Grantley.

'Ah, well,' he said, 'that ends it;' as if he had had some thought of joining us until he knew of Mary's presence.

I said something about having to get back in time for dinner, and added that my absence would already be wondered at. We shook hands as though we were the most commonplace of acquaintances, and he descended into the hall with me. We repeated our good-byes there, and I went away as unhappy as I can remember to have been at any time. No comment was made by any

member of our party upon my absence. We dined at the table d'hôte, amid a loud chatter of talk and the wild rushes of overworked waiters, and there was bustle and noise enough to distract attention from me. To have sat out a quiet dinner without my forced hilarity and frequent depression being noticed would have been impossible, but in this scene of noise and animation I escaped. The ladies had been sight-seeing in my absence, and were all a little tired. I was glad to get away from them, and sauntering in the fast growing darkness under the shade of the trees in the Champs Elysées, I thought over the day's experience. Over and over again I made up my mind to go back to Pole and speak my heart out to him, but the purpose always failed me.

When it had grown quite dark I made my way back to the hotel, and as I emerged from the broad promenade into the street I became aware of a solitary sombre figure standing there. It moved on as I approached,

and I recognised Pole's step and carriage. The street was very quiet. In the rear the innumerable lamps of the Place de la Concorde, themselves invisible, made a yellow haze upon the darkness, and the long single line of lights upon the streets twinkled away into the distance with a diminishing brightness. Pole walked on and I followed, half resolving at almost every footstep to accost him. He took no note of my footsteps behind him, and I gradually allowed myself to fall farther and farther in the rear. I saw him pause opposite the hotel and look up at its windows. He raised his hat and stood bare-headed for an instant, and then moved on again. I walked after him until he had passed the hotel by a hundred yards, when he turned, and we encountered each other. He was going by without recognising me, but I hailed him.

'That you, Jack?' he said, in a different voice from that in which he had last addressed me. He passed his arm through

mine, and we walked for a considerable distance without speaking. My heart was so hot with friendship, and so sore and tender with regrets, that I could not trust myself to speak. He led me back to the Champs Elysées, where the moon, which was late in rising, had just begun to make an uncertain glory in the sky.

'Tell me about Mary,' he said suddenly. 'How is she? What does she do? Is she happy, or contented? Tell me all about her.'

There was not much to tell in the story of that life of silent heroism, self-conquest, and self-denial, and what little there was I told badly, being indeed afraid to trust myself too far.

'I believe,' he said simply, 'that she cared for me as much as ever a woman cared for a man in this world. Heaven knows I was never worth it, but then a man's worthiness has nothing to do with such a matter. There isn't a trouble I have that she doesn't share, and she has enough and to spare of her own.

They're better than we are, Jack. They're stronger, and purer, and more patient.'

Finding him in this changed and softened mood, I opened out my heart to him. There is no need to try to repeat here what I said to him. I had no right to preach, but every man, however weak he knows himself to be, has the right to hold out a hand of help and fellowship.

'You're right, Jack,' he said. 'Say no more about it. Paris is no place for me, and mine for this year past has been no life for an honest man to lead. I have known it all along. I shall get away to-morrow. I don't know yet where I shall go or what I shall do, but I'll try to find something worth doing, and I'll try to do it. Good-night, Denham. Don't come any farther with me just now. Good-bye, and God bless you.'

We parted there, and I watched him as he walked away in the gathering moonlight until he was hidden in the shadows of the avenue.

CHAPTER XXXII

Except for the fact that it led to my encounter with Pole, the family trip to Switzerland would have found no place in this history. It was enjoyed and left behind, and late in the autumn we all came home again, every one of us brimming over with health and energy, from grandmamma to baby. We settled down into our accustomed courses in a day or two. My valuable services not being required again by the country until Parliament met, I devoted myself to my literary work. Mrs. Grantley took friendly leave of us, and went back to Grantley Holme and her brother the Major, Clara settled down to the superintendence of the household, and Mary resumed her

suspended labours among the poor. She would, as I learned from Clara, have abandoned her distinguishing dress altogether, but for the fact that the people amongst whom she laboured had grown accustomed to it, and to part with it would have been to invite curiosity.

My own inquiries had so long led me to a tolerably close acquaintance with the class among whom she laboured that it was out of no curiosity with respect to their condition that I sometimes availed myself of an unoccupied hour to accompany her upon her rounds. I had an idea when I first offered her my companionship, that it would be pleasant to see how she dealt with the people, and I certainly found that idea verified. It *was* pleasant to see how that mild presence brought comfort to the sick and troubled, and to witness the unfailing respect with which the roughest blackguards of her quarter greeted her. I had a talk with one gentleman, I remember, who was the terror

of Green Hill Lane, a rather difficult neighbourhood for any single individual to be a terror to. What this gentleman did for a living during the limited periods for which he kept out of jail I am unable to say, but he took a pride in dressing like one of the old-fashioned tribe of coal-heavers, in shorts, highlows, and gray worsted stockings. He was sunning his ponderous calves on a doorstep and smoking a short clay there, one afternoon, when Mary and I came upon him together. He was a sulky, ill-conditioned looking fellow, but he gave her an actual smile of welcome as he got up to make way for her to enter the house.

'You again, mum?' he said, with gruff civility. 'I thought we'd seen the last of you, mum.' Mary answered that she had been away for her health. 'I 'ope you've got it, mum,' he said. 'You are a lookin' better than you was.'

She thanked him, and passed within doors, and I, waiting for her in the street, tried to

enter into converse with her acquaintance. He received my advances with marked distrust, and resuming his pipe sat down again upon the doorstep and smoked with an obviously contemptuous disregard of my presence. When I endeavoured, in spite of this unpromising beginning, to continue the conversation, he looked up at me surlily.

'Look 'ere,' he said. 'Who are you? What are you? What are you drivin' at? Who are you tryin' to get at? I didn't address my conversation to you, did I? What do you want to address your conversation to me for?'

I told him I did not like this pride and stand-offishness between man and man, and added that if a duke were to speak to me I should try to treat him civilly.

'That's a noo lay,' said my new acquaintance. 'Anything does as long as you can edge the patter in, don't it, guv'nor? Just get a start, so as a cove can't stop you, then you can sling it in to your heart's content,

can't you? What's the line? Is it gospel, or teetotal, or the papers? I knows 'em. Don't you talk to me. I can get as much o' your kind o' chin-music as I wants when I'm in quod.'

'Do you care to know what my lay is?' I asked him.

'No, guv'nor,' he responded. 'If you puts it plain, I don't.'

'Come,' I urged, 'you didn't treat the lady in this way.'

'No,' he said, dexterously expectorating without removing his pipe from his lips, 'I didn't, guv'nor. But you see you ain't a lady. And if you was, it's about a hundred million to one as I shouldn't.'

'You wouldn't treat me in that way if I were a lady?' I asked him. 'Why not?'

''Cos,' he answered, as sulkily as ever, 'it'd be a thousand million to one as you wouldn't be a patch on her. When I meets a lady as knows how to be a lady, why then I takes my 'at off to her like a man. Why

not? Do you think a cove can't tell a lady when he sees her? There's plenty of 'em comes round here a pickin' up their petticoats, steppin' fine and talkin' thin and pretty. Ladies? Ladies be blowed! I knows 'em when I sees 'em. Don't you talk to me.'

After this he subsided to a bull-dog silence. I always made a point of carrying a well-stocked tobacco pouch with me upon this sort of journey. I produced it now, and held it out to him with a request that he would help himself.

'I don't ask,' he observed, 'for no man's charity. I can always buy as much backy as I wants, and if I couldn't I should nick it.'

When Mary emerged from the house this uncompromising personage seemed abashed in the memory of his former politeness, and merely growled, 'Good arternoon, mum,' as he stood aside to let her pass. I told her as we went along together of the testimonial to

her ladyhood which I had just received. She seemed rather pained than pleased by it, and she told me that there were some obviously well-intentioned people visiting in the neighbourhood, who spent both time and money in the service of the poor, but, she added, I could hardly imagine how little tact they had.

'If you want to get near these people,' she said, 'you must not remember such a thing as social difference. You must forget that it exists. If you only pretend to forget they are very quick and keen to find you out. But if you really forget it they are at ease at once, though they never for an instant forget it themselves. I am afraid that you may think I am growing democratic, but I really think there are as nice people here as one meets elsewhere. Their manners and their ways of speech are not ours, but apart from those things, which matter a good deal of course, there are some real ladies and gentlemen here.'

One hears this sort of statement made in pure cant sometimes, by people who do not in the slightest little degree believe it in their hearts. But Mary did believe it, and I suppose that her belief afforded one of the truest reasons for her success.

'There are some amongst them,' she went on, 'who have really been ladies and gentlemen. A good many, of course, are pretenders, and exaggerate the better times they have seen, but some have really fallen from complete respectability.'

As she talked thus, we passed by a noisome well of a court, where a group of women were loudly discussing some topic of general interest. I caught the voluble, shrill rattle of an Italian voice, and one woman, with her hands waving high in the air, was screaming, 'Mais, Madame, je vous jure,' as we went by. This court was the sorrowfullest part of Green Hill Lane, though the whole thoroughfare was sorrowful enough. The fronts of its houses seemed to have

known no cleansing or renovating touch since the hour of their erection. From the pavement to the sills of the shop windows the walls were caked with the mud which had been splashed upon them by the feet of generations of wayfarers. The paint of the woodwork was smothered with bubbles, like a sort of seaweed, and the window-panes were encrusted with the residuum of hundreds of fogs, and smeared with the rain of uncounted storms. The houses huddled together from one end of the lane to the other without a single break on either side, except the one made by that noisome well of a court, and the lane was so narrow that a single hackney carriage would have filled it from kerb to kerb. The inhabitants of the lane did at home what little washing they had to do, and the windows of the wretched houses were always garnished by vandyked rags of dingy white, as if in satire of festivity, or as if the King of Poverty's Miseries were coming that way on a ghastly gala day,

and his subjects were in readiness to receive him.

We were perhaps twenty yards beyond the court when a slipshod footstep sounded behind us, and a shrill voice cried out, 'Sœur, sœur, ma sœur!' Mary and I turned at this call together, and I recognised the Frenchwoman who had been exclaiming in the court.

'You speak French, my sister?' said the woman. Mary answered in the affirmative, and she poured out a story so voluble and in so marked a southern accent, half patois and half French, that it was almost impossible to follow her. We made out enough to know that somebody was in urgent need of help, and we turned round with the woman at once, and accompanied her into the court, she talking all the while with a passionate, voluble eloquence only half comprehensible. At a sign from Mary I remained in the court, whilst she entered at a low-browed door, and disappeared. A little Italian man

on crutches, with a dark, wrinkled, wizened visage like that of a preternaturally wise and amiable ape, clattered across the broken pavement of the court, and opened fire upon me in his own language. He had talked for a minute before I could make him understand that I spoke no Italian, but addressing him in French I discovered that he had a fair mastery of that language, and asked him to speak in it.

He went on, more slowly, but with an eagerness which made him stumble at every phrase. Let Monsieur figure it to himself then, that a person so exalted should thus have fallen. There are those who would not believe, though the skies fall about them. They would have the birds in their fingers, and would not believe that the skies had fallen. But, for himself, he had travelled the world. He had been here, there, and everywhere. Monsieur might not credit, finding him in surroundings so degraded, yet Monsieur was obviously a gentleman,

and had perhaps travelled and made himself acquainted with the reverses of fortune. He, the crutch-supported cripple, had once been *concierge* in an hotel at Naples. He knew the world. He could tell a gentleman when he saw him, and a lady—Gran Dio, a lady!—who, that had once had the habitude to behold ladies of the great world, could doubt when he beheld one? Monsieur had, without doubt, remarked the pride in their faces. What right had the poor with pride? The great and the rich were born to it. When once he had found the person between these two eyes—very bright and piercing and eloquent eyes they were—he had heard a voice within him which had said, Behold no vulgar person! In his own land the thing was impossible, because the cause was impossible.

I arrested this voluble old Italian, and offered him leading questions. There was a lady here, a lady, heavens, yes! a lady. The blind and foolish derided her claim, and people made a scoff of her, and pointed at

her, and hooted after her because of it. Who was she? He could not tell. These foreign names were so long and so rough. The tongue stiffened and the teeth flew before they could be spoken. What was she doing here? Doing here? Great heaven, she was dying here. Dying of hunger, of want of medicines. The hospitals had rejected her, professing that she was cured.

I was standing with my back half-turned to the doorway by which Mary had entered, when the crippled old Italian stopped short in his swift, stammering speech, and stared across my shoulder. Before I could turn, his crutches and the withered legs they helped were skimming over the broken pavement. I swung round in some amaze at this, and there, in sudden terror, I saw Mary, with one hand feebly clutching at the door jamb, her face as colourless as the bands of white which surrounded it, and her figure half supported by the woman who had but a moment before summoned us from the street. I ran

forward swiftly, and relieved the woman of her burden.

'What is it?' I asked. 'What is the matter?'

She wrung her hands together, and made a little incoherent moaning noise, before she turned upon me. I was as unsuspicious then of the staring truth as I had been an hour before.

'You are ill,' I said. 'Let me help you into the air.'

I half assisted, half carried her into the court, and one of the women brought a rickety chair, and another a cracked teacup of water. I helped her to the seat, and held the cup to her lips. She drank a little of the water, and was revived by it. She made an effort to rise, but I checked her, and she kept her place. Her gray eyes, looking extraordinarily large and dark, met mine, and I saw that they were full of pain and trouble. She made a great effort to collect herself.

'Get first,' she said, 'some extract of beef, and a bottle of wine. Take the first turning to the right that way, and you will find a street of decent shops. Bring the things back at once, and then go for a doctor. Oh, pray don't wait to think of me. I was shocked for the moment, but I am well again. Pray go! go at once! You see I am well. There is no need to stay here.'

I could only suppose that some one was hovering between life and death, and had instant need of support and stimulus. I tore out of the court, ran the length of the lane in the direction she had indicated, and searching up and down came upon an Italian warehouse, where I bought a tin of beef extract, and a grocer, from whom I bought a bottle of port. I ran back with these, and found that Mary had already re-entered the house. The Frenchwoman who had accosted us in the street took the things from my hands and rushed upstairs with them, returning almost immediately with instructions to me

to find a doctor. I hurried back into the street, and by good hap finding a cab there, drove at once in pursuit of Dr. Mason. He was not at home, but the servant who answered my summons at the door was able to tell me where to intercept him, and ten minutes later we were driving back together. I was considerably disquieted about Mary, and told the doctor that he might expect to have more patients than one. The French-woman was eagerly waiting for us when we arrived, and began to rain down blessings on the doctor, who, as I then discovered, was already known in that quarter. The two ascended together, and I was left alone once more, this time for the space of some ten minutes. Then the doctor came down alone.

'Miss Delamere is all right again,' he said, 'and you need have no fear about her. She seems, however, to have made a very extraordinary discovery, and she wants you to go upstairs and verify it. You're not easily shocked yourself, are you? Wait a bit. I'll

tell you the story. There is a woman upstairs suffering from spinal paralysis. She was knocked down by a cab in the street some two months ago, and was taken to St. Bartholomew's Hospital. She stayed there a week or two, and was then dismissed as cured. Since then she has been very queer at times, and now, for nearly a week, nobody has seen her until an hour ago. Then, her fellow-lodgers breaking into her room, find her almost dead. The lower extremities are useless, and want of sustenance has so far prostrated her that another day might have done her business. You're a personal friend of Worborough's, and that's the reason why I take the trouble to prepare you. She claims to be Lady Worborough.'

CHAPTER XXXIII

I WALKED up and down the court for an hour after Dr. Mason's departure, an object of interest to all the boyhood of the neighbourhood, and all the slatternly little girls who nursed babies. These thronged the narrow entrance of the court, scattering with screams whenever I walked towards them, and gathering compactly together again whenever I walked away, until at last long immunity gave them courage and they stood in rapt wonder at the apparition of gloves, a new hat, and clean linen in that unexpected quarter. Mary appeared in the doorway, and I hastened to meet her. To a casual and unobservant eye there would have been no sign of excitement in her aspect, but I,

who knew what strange reason she had for amazement and emotion, could see that she had not yet recovered.

'Have these people,' she asked, 'or has the doctor told you anything of the sick woman's identity?' I answered with a mere motion of the head. 'She is asleep,' Mary continued, in a half-whisper, as if there had been already need for caution. 'You may see her. You will know her?' I signified assent again. 'Come this way. Tread softly.'

The air in the court itself was foul and heavy, but it was free and pure by comparison with that which crawled about the staircase. The gloom there seemed a natural part of the air's weight and closeness. The wretched stair creaked and complained beneath our footsteps. We mounted to the third story, and there Mary slowly pushed open a door which jarred and shrieked upon its hinges in spite of all her caution, and motioned me to enter. I went in on tiptoe,

and took in the squalor of the chamber at a glance, the smoky time-stained walls, green in places with some bygone winter's rains, the cracked, uneven floor, the broken plaster of the ceiling, where the bare laths showed like a desert map of unknown countries; the single window, with a shattered pane stuffed with rag, the grate, with the dead ashes of an old fire in it. There was no bed in the room, but on the floor a huddled heap of sacking, with wood shavings thickly spread below it. A cloak that had once been elegant covered the form of a woman sleeping on this miserable couch. The face was hidden, but a mass of disorderly black hair streamed across the impoverished coverlid, with a small ear shining in ghastly and exaggerated whiteness amongst its disordered coils. Between the couch and the door was a small table, drawn a little to one side, so that it did not intercept the view. I advanced, still on tiptoe, and laying my hands on this, bent forward, and surveyed the sleeping woman's

face. It was strangely changed from the face I had seen when I had last parted from her, but I knew it instantly. By what wild recklessness or what disaster she had so far stripped herself of the means of livelihood as to have fallen to such a refuge as this in so short a space of time I could not guess, but there was no doubt as to her identity.

Once assured, I turned away, and cautiously retraced my steps. Mary stood in the half gloom of the landing, and when she saw me her eyes asked a question. Mine answered it, and with a swift and nervous gesture she took both my hands, and held them tightly.

'You are sure?' she whispered.

'Sure,' I whispered back again.

She motioned me downstairs, and I obeyed her, she following in my footsteps. Half-way down she laid a hand upon my shoulder and arrested me.

'I must not leave her,' she said. 'I must not leave her for a moment. She is so nearly

exhausted that nothing but the most constant care can save her. Tell Clara that I shall not be able to get home to-night.'

She spoke even now in a guarded tone, and I instinctively answered her in the same fashion.

'You must have help,' I said. 'You must not be allowed to wear yourself away. I shall call at the nurses' institute, and send you an assistant. Then, when your relief arrives, you must come home.'

'I do not think,' she answered, 'that I shall dare to leave her for a time. You forget. I have had experience lately. I shall be glad of assistance. It was thoughtful, and like you, to think about it. Go now, and be sure that Clara is not alarmed.'

I was half-way down the remainder of the stairs when I heard the rustle of her dress again behind me. When I turned I could see dimly a pained and confused look upon her face, and I fancied she was blushing, though I was uncertain in the gloom.

'I have no money, John. Things will be wanted. Lord Worborough will repay you.'

So far as I knew that was the only mention of his name she had made since she had learned of my discovery of Pole's wife in Paris. I gave her my purse, and told her to spare nothing that was needful, and she went upstairs again. For an instant, before the first turning took her out of sight, her beautiful pale face hung in the gloom like the pictured head of a saint. The black robe melted into the surrounding shadows, and only the face, with the band of white across the forehead, was half visible. Then this floated away, and I went down the steps and out of the court alone.

It had never entered my mind to believe that the miserable woman I had just left behind would have pushed her resolution not to accept the allowance her husband offered her to such a point as this. I had supposed, as almost anybody would have done in my place, that we had but to wait until she felt

the first touch of necessity to receive her capitulation in form. We knew perfectly well that her desire for vengeance on Pole weighed far more heavily with her than any sense that she was being defrauded of her rights. At the time of her marriage with Pole, if she had ever contemplated a separation from him, a fifth part of the income I had offered in her husband's behalf would have seemed an actually munificent allowance.

I wondered how Pole would take the news of this victorious obstinacy, and on my way homeward I called at a telegraph station and sent off two despatches, each addressed to him, the one through his steward, and the other through his solicitor, requesting his immediate presence in London. I had just loose silver enough to pay for the messages. It was quite uncertain when I should hear from Pole, for he had closed his house in Paris, and was wandering again, I knew not where. It might even be weeks before he

would communicate with either of his men of business, and it was possible that even the most serious events might happen without his knowledge. It is curious to notice how even in one's thoughts one shrinks from the actual confession of certain things. I know now, and I knew then, that the most serious events meant nothing more or less than the one great serious event of all. Brought face to face with a problem which happily but few people can ever have to look at seriously, I felt a something strange and dreadful in the sense that it was the bounden duty of every creature concerned to strain every intelligence and every effort to conserve a life which cursed its owner and spread a blight on all who knew her. Not the best loved, not the most useful and most highly honoured, not the very centre of benevolence and wisdom, would lay a greater claim upon skill, patience, tenderness, than this self-scorning centre of unhappiness. The very knowledge of her own poor deserving would

have to be a spur to conscience, lest there should be even an inward self-accusing whisper of neglect.

Clara was disturbed by the news I had to give her, chiefly on Mary's account.

'I know what will happen,' she said. 'She will take this as a case of conscience, a thousand times more even than any other, and if she is not taken care of she will watch herself to death. Where is this place, John? You must find a professional nurse and get Mary away.'

This reminded me of my own undertaking, and I told Clara of it.

'See to it at once,' she said. 'You will find a nurse immediately. Take her with you in a cab, and bring Mary back with you.'

It was easy to give orders in this impetuous manner. But what, I asked, if Mary would not come?

'Tell her,' Clara answered, 'that I myself will go and compel her to come home and

take her natural night's rest. I know, John; it's very angelic, but it isn't common-sense. I'm not going to have the life of that darling girl, who sweetens the world for everybody who knows her, thrown away, or even risked, for a worthless creature who only lives to make herself and other people miserable. If the poor woman is in such a den as you describe, we must take her out of it as soon as the doctor will allow her to be moved. If more than one nurse is necessary, we must get more than one, and if it's safe to go, Mary can superintend them. Anything more than that I will not listen to.

'My dear,' I ventured to respond, 'you are the very genius of good sense.'

'Don't be sarcastic, John,' she answered. 'I am sure I am right. Go at once and find a nurse, and take her with you. And above all, don't fail to bring Mary back again. Tell her that if she refuses I will come and stay with her. Tell her that you can't stop me —you know you can't stop me, John—and

that you will hold her responsible. She knows how delicate I am.'

Thus armed, I borrowed money from my wife, and set out again. Dr. Mason gave me the address of an institute for nurses, where I was almost certain immediately to find a trained and trustworthy woman. I drove thither without delay, was introduced to the presence of the matron, explained to her as far as was necessary the circumstances of the case, and in a quarter of an hour was bowling away towards Green Hill Court, in company with a professional nurse, so bounteously proportioned that she nearly filled the cab. She was a calm-looking woman of obviously amiable temperament, and had a mother-of-a-family air about her which was eminently assuring. When we arrived at the court together, and I had paid the cabman, I caught her looking at her surroundings with an air of surprise and almost of dismay, so that I felt constrained to take her partly into confidence.

'The poor lady who lies here,' I said, 'has been in hiding from her friends. She was discovered by a providential accident this afternoon, and we shall remove her as soon as the doctor thinks it safe to do so.'

'Well, sir,' she answered, with an air of philosophy, 'the greater the need, the better the deed. It looks needy enough hereabouts.'

With that she seized a small black portmanteau with which she had come provided, and waddled resolutely into the court and up the stairway. It was pitch dark there by this time, though it was still light outside, and I had to illuminate the way by striking wax vestas one after the other, so that we had two pauses on our upward passage. The light revealed the excessive squalor of the building. The stairs were encrusted with old filth, and the painted walls were deep in a sort of half-dry mire which came off, friable and clammy, at the touch of the fingers. The cracked door, ill-fitting and warped

from its original shape, guided us by a score of glittering crevices to the room we sought; and it was somewhat surprising to find, when I had knocked and we had been called upon to enter, that this brilliant illumination proceeded from a single candle. One would have thought, from the intensity with which the light streamed out upon the darkness through the cracks and crevices of the door, that the whole chamber was alive with light. As we entered Mary rose with her finger on her lips, and recognising me with a glance of some astonishment, looked inquiringly at my companion. I advanced stealthily, and the nurse, in spite of her ponderous proportions, slid upon the crazy floor like a list-slippered silence.

'I have found a nurse,' I whispered, 'who will take your place. Clara insists upon your coming home at once, and declares that if you will not do so, she will share your watch. You know what a resolute young person it is, and you know that she will keep her word.'

The nurse had already, with a systematic air, taken off her tidy bonnet and handsome mantle, which was ornamented by a profusion of black glass beads, had laid them neatly on the table, and now slid into the chair which had been occupied by Mary before our entrance. She took the black portmanteau upon her knees, opened it by a spring, and, drawing from its depths a roll of worsted stocking with knitting-needles thrust through it, set the portmanteau on the floor again, and began at once to knit with a silence and rapidity astonishing to contemplate. She had not been there a minute, and contrived to look as if she had been born and lived there.

'Dr. Mason,' said Mary, speaking in the same careful tones I myself had used, 'promised to bring a local practitioner to watch the case, and said that he would be here to meet him at nine o'clock. I must stay till then.'

'You will come away then?' I asked.

'Certainly,' she answered. 'I will come away then.'

The nurse, hearing this conversation, rose from the place she had assumed, but there was no other chair in the chamber, and I had to stumble downstairs in search of one.

'And now,' said Mary, 'go home and tell Clara that she need have no anxiety on my account. When we have Dr. Mason's further instructions nurse will know what is to be done, and I will leave at once.'

'I will be here at nine o'clock,' I answered. 'If the doctor will allow it we will move her in the morning to some decent place where she can have good air and quiet.'

The rackety place swarmed with life and noises.

'Are you quite fresh and strong, nurse?' Mary asked the comfortable woman at her side. 'It will not be pleasant watching here. Do you think we might get an arm-chair for the nurse, John?'

I answered 'Certainly;' and set out in

pursuit of that necessary. I found it in the neighbouring street, a great, roomy, cushioned thing, fit for the nurse's generous proportions, and modestly priced at seven-and-sixpence. I came back again, bearing this trophy in my arms at considerable inconvenience; but I excited no man's attention, or woman's either, and it would have seemed as if it were not at all a startling or unusual thing in that neighbourhood to find a man cumbrously embracing his household goods in the public thoroughfare.

This duty discharged, I had still ample time to search for a new hansom, drive home with the news of Mary's consent to Clara, snatch a hurried apology for dinner, and get back to Green Hill Court by nine o'clock. Dr. Mason had arrived a moment before me, and what with the certainty that the sick woman's apparently wild stories of herself were true, and with the advent of so many well-dressed strangers, the court was in a turmoil. The crippled Italian swung rapidly

forward at the sound of my approaching cab-wheels, and intercepted me whether I would or no. He had been certain all along that the patient was a *gran dama*, and the other people had scoffed at him. Yet now—aha! Why did people of consideration come from the four quarters of the winds to visit her, unless his thoughts were true? Who but people of the first consideration were visited by two doctors at a time? He hovered round me on his restless crutches with a surprising agility, and I was obliged to be excessively gingerly in my movements, lest I should overthrow him in the dark as I walked towards the bottom of the court. I made one or two observations in answer to his rapid, broken chatter, and the English contingent of the court's inhabitants made a chorus to us, chiefly inspired by wonder that anybody out of poverty's kingdom should be able to understand his language. I know it will seem an absurd statement to many, but I know for a fact that the very poor of

London suppose all inhabitants of foreign countries to be poor and helpless, and regard a foreign tongue as the last badge of poverty.

I escaped him at last, and found my way up the desolate and broken stairs once more. There was a low murmur of voices in the room, and when in answer to my faint and scarcely audible knock I was admitted, Dr. Mason was giving instructions to the nurse. The humbler practitioner, who was a man of three or four-and-twenty only, and had a face of keen intelligence, listened respectfully, and accepted the great man's dicta with as evident a worship as a student of painting might have for the President of the Royal Academy, or a subaltern for the directions of a Field Marshal. The patient was awake, but very feeble. Her illness and her prolonged half-wilful abstinence from food had peaked her features and brightened her great black eyes unnaturally. She looked all eyes, and the eyes looked a sad complaining nothing, as if

she had fallen away from all sense of feeling and emotion.

The doctors left with Mary and myself, and we walked together into the nearest respectable thoroughfare. Talking of the case, at present, Dr. Mason said, he would not authorise the unhappy creature's removal. Perhaps it might be possible to-morrow. It would, of course, be well to secure cleanliness, pure air, and quiet, but her condition was for the moment so critical that he could only leave her where she lay.

'You have seen her now,' he said. 'What do you think? Is she the woman she pretends to be?'

'Yes,' I answered. 'She is Lord Worborough's wife.'

'Ah well,' rejoined the doctor; 'she'll be no great loss if she goes, though we've got to do our best for her. Have you communicated with Lord Worborough? He ought to know.'

I told him that I had already despatched

two telegrams, but that I was uncertain of the time they would take to reach their destination. He drew me farther back, and allowed Mary and the young doctor to walk at some distance ahead of us.

'Sister Constance is Miss Delamere, isn't she?' And when I had answered in the affirmative, he nodded several times, and said that it was a curious conjunction of circumstances, when you came to think of it. 'Between ourselves, you know,' he added, 'I'm a little bit uncertain. We'll do what we can for her, but I don't think she'll pull through it. I don't *think* she'll pull through it.'

CHAPTER XXXIV

In two days' time the patient, under the influence of warmth and nourishment, so far rallied that we were able to transport her to a clean and comfortable lodging. She gained more in wilfulness than she gained in strength, and the nurse so far confided in me as to tell me that she had never before encountered so intractable a subject. For four or five days I went regularly to see her once a day, to ascertain for myself what progress she was making, and she seemed at first to regard my presence as being quite natural and in the common order of things. I dare say she had been too weak to wonder much, or to take interest in her own surroundings. On the fourth or fifth day she

had recovered something of her habitual scorn, and asked me point blank what business her condition was of mine. I tried to let this query go by unanswered, but she grew angry at my silence, and fearing lest in her weakened state she should do herself a mischief by an outburst of temper, I did my best to soothe her. I told her in what way I had learned of her accident and her whereabouts, and I added that I had wired to her husband. She lay looking at me with her greatened eyes for a time, and then with a faint motion of her head upon the pillow, as if she would have nodded to emphasise her words, she said—

'I am not so easily conquered as you fancied. I shall have my way.'

A little later the nurse offered to do some small service for her, and was rejected angrily. She took no notice of this, but went tranquilly on, and the patient broke into a rage, which, though feebly expressed, was so intense and unassuageable that the woman was compelled to desist.

At this moment Mary, whom I had accompanied to the house, entered the room with a cup of beef tea, which she at once proceeded to administer. Lady Worborough still cast glances of anger and aversion at the nurse, and muttered angrily about her, but she accepted Mary's attentions, though with a sufficiently ill grace. From that time forward she seemed to do her best to make the hired nurse's position unbearable. That excellent woman bore with the vagaries of sickness and ill-temper with a phlegmatic good humour which irritated the patient more than I think any other reception of her angry and contemptuous ways could have done. One of the purposely irritating devices Lady Worborough adapted was to beg Mary, in a tone of amiability, to re-perform for her any little office the nurse might already have done.

'I dare say she means well,' she would say, 'or might mean well if she did not give way to temper, but she is a clumsy creature, and quite out of place in a sick-room.'

The nurse was not to be persuaded into any show of anger, whatever devices her ladyship might adopt, and the patient being one of those people who above all things loathe defeat in this direction, the good woman became utterly hateful and unbearable to her. If she could but have been persuaded to retort, the two might have got on together. Even if she had handled a tea-cup with unnecessary emphasis, or had poked the fire with more than needful vigour, the sick woman would have found some solace. But to lie there and spend the weary, painful hours in the vain attempt to irritate that placid, irresponsive, obstinately good-humoured person was to aggravate her own native ill-humour beyond endurance.

One day, when she had been installed in her new lodgings for about a week, I called to make my customary inquiry. I had been received with so little grace, as was only natural in the circumstances, that for a day or two I had not intruded upon her lady-

ship's presence, but had simply made my inquiries at the door, where I had had a momentary interview with Mary. On this occasion I learned, a little to my astonishment, that Lady Worborough missed me, and desired me to be shown to her room.

'You are very regular in your inquiries, it appears, Mr. Denham,' she said, when in answer to this invitation I presented myself, 'but you should come in person to see what progress I make. It will be so much more satisfactory to your friend if you can tell him at first hand how sure I am to live and be a comfort to him.'

She was quite helpless below the waist, and I am inclined to think from one or two phrases she had let fall already, that she believed this terrible affliction likely to last her lifetime. She did not seem at all quelled by the prospect, or even in any marked degree to rebel at it, but my own reflections upon it helped me to be patient with her bitter temper.

'His lordship takes his time in coming,' she said a moment later, with a feeble mockery. 'You and he, Mr. Denham, have rather a poor opinion of a woman's strength of mind, I think. I have heard so often that a little resolution, a little firmness, a little judicious patience, would work wonders. But, you see, I have not given in. I should have died if I had not been found. No doubt. But dying is not giving in. It is not even being beaten.'

'If you could have been persuaded,' I answered, 'that your husband had no wish to enter into any warfare with you it would certainly have been happier. If you could be persuaded now to arrive at any compromise, I am sure that he will be willing to do anything in reason.'

'I do not mean,' she responded, 'to accept any compromise whatever.'

Feeble and wasted as she was, there was a kind of triumph in her manner.

'You think that because I am paralysed

you have me in your power, but the fact is completely the reverse of that. I accept what you offer me at present, and I will continue to accept it for a reasonable time. I wanted to see you, Mr. Denham, chiefly in order that I might tell you this. When the reasonable time has expired, I shall refuse to take anything further from you, and will either have my rights or nothing. We will see whether or not my husband is villain and brute enough to allow a paralytic wife to starve.'

'Can you fairly speak of your husband as allowing you to starve when he offers you five thousand pounds a year?' I asked. I was in sore dread lest this question should excite her, but on the whole it seemed very reasonable to put it, and I ventured the experiment. It was a relief to find that she could answer it tranquilly.

'You observe, Mr. Denham, that when a thing is offered to you on such terms that you would rather die than take it, it might

almost as well not be offered at all. I will have my right or nothing.'

There was a flash of fire in the last phrase, and I had already had too clear an indication of what her temper could be to dare to push her further.

The young doctor came in a little later, and she welcomed him as she had welcomed me, with a graciousness of manner very unusual in her. I was not long in being allowed to understand the meaning of this changed manner.

'You will find a seat upon this side of the bed, doctor,' she said, indicating the position by a slight motion of the hand. 'Pray come and tell Mr. Denham how much better I am. He will hardly believe me when I tell him. He is inclined to be a little out of spirits about me, and it will cheer him to know that I am really getting stronger. Mr. Denham is a great friend of Lord Worborough's, doctor. He will be able to convey the news to my husband, and to ease *his* mind.'

Neither her tone nor her manner gave any indication of the real meaning of this speech. It was spoken smilingly, and even with a kind of coquetry. If I had not known the truth so well already, I should have supposed the words to have meant neither more nor less than they expressed in themselves. The young doctor felt her pulse, and made several commonplace inquiries about her condition, to all of which she answered with the same amiable calm.

'Lady Worborough certainly gains in strength, Mr. Denham,' he said, looking up at me. 'Gains considerably in strength. If you could contrive now,' he added, looking down at his patient, 'to preserve your present spirits, your advance might be much more rapid.'

'Oh,' she answered, smiling at him, 'I shall not lose my spirits. You must know, doctor, that I am a most unconquerable person, when I choose.' Then she turned to me, 'You will let his lordship know how I

progress, Mr. Denham. You must write quite a flourishing account of me. I should so like to see his dear face when he reads your letter. It would be a comfort to me. I am a little tired now, Mr. Denham. I have talked too much. Good day. Send Sister Constance to me.'

I thought at the time that this request was made with no other object than to prevent me from inquiring further into her condition. I obeyed it nevertheless, and went my way, wondering at the woman's implacability and bitterness. So far, as I devoutly believe until this moment, the wrong which had separated her husband and herself was wholly on her side. I have often thought that this may partly have accounted for her hatred, for there is unhappily no philosophy truer than that which teaches that you have to hate to justify yourself from the victim of your own ill-doing.

Clara and I naturally thought the matter over pretty often, and she, with her usual

directness of statement, declared Lady Worborough to be altogether a horrible and hateful person. I recounted this particular conversation to her faithfully, and she was moved to great anger by it.

'Do you wonder,' she demanded, 'at your friend refusing to spend his life with a woman of that character? She would rather die than take the allowance he offers her? I think if I were in his place I should be inclined to put that to the test. I would engage a man to wait upon her every day with the money and the necessary document. She would yield if she had the chance to yield.'

I represented that she seemed fairly well to have accepted the test already. Even before her accident rendered her helpless, she had sunk so low as to live voluntarily in one of the vilest slums in London, and now her helplessness gave her a new strength, and she knew it.

Clara turned upon me with flashing eyes.

'Do you mean to tell me, John, that you

will counsel your friend to yield to that woman's demands?'

I answered that I should so counsel him if he asked my advice. It would be ignominious not to yield in such a case.

'Well,' my wife declared, with a kind of despairing resignation, 'it would be of no use for us to quarrel about other people's quarrels, but men don't seem to see things as women do. Suppose it were a man who chose to act in this way. Suppose, a man did all that lay in his power to make his wife's life a burden to her. Suppose outside that expressed intention, he drank, and had a hideous temper. Suppose, the wife offered him five thousand pounds a year—he having not a penny in the world—to go away and merely cease to be a torment to her, whose side would you take then? Would you advise the wife to yield?'

I thought not, but then, as I pointed out to her, I had never been one of the advocates of equal rights between the sexes. In such

a case as she chose to imagine my opinion was that a stout horsewhip might be employed with great advantage; though, even if the husband had been the sinner and not the wife, it would have been difficult to deal with him, when he became physically helpless, if he insisted seriously on dying or on having what he conceived to be his rights.

In the case of this hypothetical personage of her own creation Clara felt herself at liberty to be altogether resolute and unbending.

'I would allow him to insist upon dying,' she declared. 'I would tell him with absolute plainness, "If you choose, out of your own wicked obstinacy, to die in the midst of plenty, you must do it. There is your money. Take it and use it, or leave it and starve, as seems good to you." Is the world to be turned into an asylum for spoiled children who have gone mad with the indulgence of their own selfish passions? If Lady Worborough had *me* to deal with

she——' She paused there, so fired by that prospect that she was afraid of saying too much, I fancy. When she had walked up and down the room for a minute or two she stopped short before me and opened up a new attack. 'The fact is, John,' she said, 'that your absurd yielding to this wicked woman is part and parcel of the enormous injustice your sex perpetually heaps on ours.'

This statement astonished me so much that I could find no reply to it, but she gave me no time for wonder. Her next sentences enlightened me.

'You propose,' she went on, 'to give way to this woman's monstrous claim. You admit that if the cases were reversed, and it was a man who made it, he would deserve to be horsewhipped. That is, you admit that her conduct is utterly base and despicable. But you don't resent it; you don't fight against it. And why? It is beneath your dignity to fight with her because she is a woman. Your *mépris* of women is so profound that it

seems beneath you to meet them on equal ground — the equal ground of justice, and honour, and common-sense.'

'My darling Clara,' I urged, 'the dear creatures wouldn't endure it for a moment. And besides, they don't deserve to be treated in that way. A woman is not made for the rough-and-tumble of the world. It is no part of a man's duty to treat women as if they were men, any more than to treat men as if they were women. You think our honest worship degrades you? You think that, because even a bad woman carries about with her something of the sacredness with which we look at her happier sisters, men scorn your sex? That is poor logic.'

'I don't care,' protested Clara. 'I would never yield to that woman's monstrous claim. I shall think it very unmanly in you if you advise Lord Worborough to take that line.'

This proclamation alarmed me very little, for even thus early in my married life I had

made one golden discovery. I commend it here to all young husbands who may find themselves in need of advice upon this point. Follow thy conscience, oh young husband! Be just, and fear not, and the wife of thy bosom shall respect thee more a thousand times, and love thee the more honestly, and think the better of thine understanding, than if, seeking to please her, thou shouldst depart from the law of thine own soul. For the just man, who does that and that only which seems good to him, is a pillar of strength for a woman's heart to lean on, and she would rather him who can resist her for the sake of honest judgment than a thousand noodles who will melt at her tears or flutter away at her sighs in any direction in which it may please her to blow them. So that, whether I were right or wrong in respect of this matter, I was at least persuaded that I was right, and could do no less than hold to my own persuasion. Clara and I had many a battle about it, but neither could shake

the other's conviction. The one point I was profoundly convinced upon was the one thing she refused to believe, and that alone was surely enough to keep two reasonable people from agreeing with each other. I knew of a certainty that Lady Worborough employed no figure of speech when she said that she would rather die than give way. She would have found a savage satisfaction in seeming to die of her husband's neglect, and to have fixed on him the stigma of an actual brutality would have been a solace to her last hours. Whoever else gave way, she would not.

The time went by and brought no news of Pole. I wrote to his steward at Worborough, and called upon his lawyer in London, but neither of them had any tidings of him since he had given instructions for the sale of his hotel and effects in Paris. At the expiration of a fortnight Mary brought home a message from Lady Worborough to the effect that she would be obliged if I would call upon her

on the following day. I complied with this invitation with no light heart, for I guessed what was coming, and it happened that I guessed rightly.

When I reached her room she was sitting propped up with pillows in bed, and her face wore all its old expression.

'I have sent for you, Mr. Denham,' she began, 'to tell you that this must come to an end. I have waited a reasonable time; I shall wait no longer. After noon to-day I will take neither bite nor sup at the hands of any pretended charity which aims at holding me from the possession of my rights.'

I told her that there was no pretence in the matter, and since, in anticipation of this resolve of hers, I had carried the letter from the steward with me, I was able to place it at once in her hands. She glanced over it with a disdainful face, and let it fall contemptuously upon the coverlet.

'What is that to me?' she asked. 'It is easy to concoct a story of that kind, and might

be easy to keep me waiting here for ever, if you had a fool to deal with.'

'Madam,' I responded, 'you must take what course you please. I give you my word of honour as a gentleman that all reasonable means have been employed to ascertain your husband's whereabouts.'

'Understand me,' she said. 'I have not a word to add.'

'Understand me also,' I replied, as I rose to go. 'You may do whatever reckless and foolish thing you may decide upon. But I will at least take care that my friend suffers no blame from your conduct. I have no fear that you will be allowed to do yourself a real damage. The doctors and the nurses will see to that. I am certain that when Lord Worborough returns he will give way to your unjust demands rather than continue so undignified a struggle. In the meantime I have consulted Dr. Mason, and, if you will allow me, I will report his judgment in his own words.' I paused there for a moment,

and she lifted her eyes, with the old menace and contempt I had had so many opportunities of reading, but she made no verbal answer. 'I am sorry,' I went on, 'if I seem to be brutal, but you force me to absolute plainness. Dr. Mason's statement was given me in the words I give you now: "If Lady Worborough chooses to behave like a mad woman she must be treated like a mad woman. She will not be allowed to hurt herself." So soon as your husband receives my communication he will return. Until then you may safely reserve your forces. Until he comes there is nobody to coerce.'

This time she did not so much as answer me by a look. She had closed her eyes, and though I waited for a considerable length of time in silence she continued to ignore my presence. I left her there and went home, deciding in my own mind to say nothing of our interview to Clara. It would only have strengthened her opinion, as much as it strengthened mine; and since we were far

enough removed upon that point already, it was wisest to keep silence. If I had been in Pole's place, and had had a woman of that sort to deal with, I would at this pass have surrendered everything rather than continue a strife so completely ignominious. The woman was vulgar to the core, and if, as the poet tells us, the gods themselves fight in vain against stupidity, what shall it be said they hope for against a vulgar heart, which is stupidity in essence, plus greed in essence?

I was sitting in my study, revolving these things in a mood more than sufficiently embittered, when a knock came to the front door, and a servant brought me a telegram. It came from Pole, and was dated 'Geneva,' and its contents ran, 'Telegram received. With you in forty-eight hours. — Worborough.'

I carried this at once to Pole's wife, and having gained admission to her room, handed it to her, telling her that it had just arrived. She read it with a smile of mockery.

'Do you think,' she asked, 'that I am a child or a fool that you play this comedy with me? I win, you see. You may bring me my beef-tea, nurse. Not you! How often am I to tell you that I will take nothing at your hands? Where is Sister Constance? Let Sister Constance bring it. I tell you I will not take anything except from Sister Constance.'

Mary, hearing her impatient patient's voice raised in this feeble anger, entered from the adjoining room.

'Send that creature away,' screamed the sick woman. 'I will not have her about me.'

I left Mary standing over her, quiet and persuasive, and the shrill, feeble, denouncing scream followed me downstairs.

CHAPTER XXXV

When Mary returned home that night Clara happened to be absent, and she and I sat alone. She was sewing at some coarse garment for one of her poor, and I, revolving in my own mind how best to approach the theme I had in my thoughts, sat for a while pretending to read. At last I set my book on one side and announced, in as commonplace a voice as I could command, that I had received a telegram from Lord Worborough, who would be in England the day after the morrow. It was not easy to mention his name in her presence, mainly because of the facts themselves, but partly because there had been a conspiracy of silence amongst us, and we had all grown used to the avoidance

of that topic in her presence. She trembled ever so little, and the motion of the needle grew unsteady and inaccurate. She was more accustomed to controlling her feelings than to concealing them, and was by nature curiously frank for a woman, and almost at once she laid down her sewing and looked up at me with nothing but a slight pallor to indicate the emotion this news had caused her.

'Yes?' she said simply. 'Your message seems to have taken some time in reaching him.'

'He was not far afield,' I answered; 'no farther away than Geneva.'

'Does he know,' she asked, 'your reasons for calling him home?'

'Not yet,' I told her. But I supposed that he would have guessed that it related to Lady Worborough.

'Do you think,' she asked, 'that he will grant the claim she intends to make upon him?' I dare say I looked somewhat sur-

prised at this, for she added, in a voice of explanation, 'Lady Worborough talks a great deal to me of her own affairs.'

'I think he will do anything,' I responded, 'anything within the bounds of reason, to put an end to the struggle which is going on between them.'

I heard a faint sigh as she took up her work and bent over it anew. It seemed to indicate relief, and I asked if such a course on his part would be approved by her.

'I do not know,' she said. 'I think that Lord Worborough will try to act for the best.'

She was so tranquil and self-controlled that I began to feel safe in discussing the subject with her.

'Of course,' I told her, 'I should not think of pressing my advice upon him if it were not asked for, but he and I are such close friends, and he has so invariably consulted my judgment in this matter, that I have no doubt it will be asked again.'

'And if it should be,' she asked me,

dropping her sewing to her lap and looking up at me anew, 'you would advise him to surrender?'

'I should advise him,' I answered, 'to end a quarrel with an opponent who has neither generosity nor decency. It is impossible to conduct a dignified warfare with such a woman as Lady Worborough.'

'She is a woman of a strange temper,' Mary said.

'Strange indeed!' I echoed, and then we were both silent for a considerable time.

Mary took up her sewing, but did not go on with her work. I could see that she had fallen into a reverie, and the stuff dropped back to her knees with both hands clasping it. I made a pretence of reading, and in a while she awoke from her own thoughts and arose.

'I would rather not meet Lord Worborough,' she said quietly. 'If he should resolve to see his wife will you let me know of it?'

I promised, and she left the room. The subject was not renewed between us until Pole actually reached England. He sent a telegram from Dover, and I met him at the London terminus. We drove at once to his old chambers, where we found a fire already lit, a table spread, and a Swiss servant, who appeared to have been despatched in advance, in attendance. I had told Pole the story whilst driving homeward, and the man being dismissed, we sat down together to consider it and to decide upon the course to be taken.

'I must acknowledge,' I said, 'that the present condition of things is partly due to the advice I gave you. Without that advice Lady Worborough would not have fallen into the condition in which she was discovered.'

'You blame yourself?' he asked me in a voice of surprise.

I did not blame myself, but I accepted the responsibility of the advice I had offered.

'She has herself to blame,' said Pole, 'and

herself only. For my part I disclaim all responsibility. I took your advice before, and if you will give it now I will take it again. I am sick of the whole business, and only anxious to end it.'

I represented that there was no way of ending it, except by acceding to his wife's demand.

'And you advise that?' he asked me, standing before me with his hands clasped behind him.

'This is rather a hard matter,' I said in answer. 'It looks a thought too easy for one man to be generous with another's fortune, but I see no other way to end it, and I do see very clearly that it ought to be ended.'

'You advise me to give her what she asks?'

'I advise you to give her what she asks.'

He walked up and down the room abruptly once or twice before he spoke again.

'There is nothing to be gained,' he said,

'by discussing with her. If I make up my mind to do this I shall do it without bargaining or haggling.' He sat down thoughtfully, and, consulting some memoranda in a pocket-book, made a few pencilled notes. 'I shall strike,' he said then, looking up at me in the act of returning the book to his pocket, 'whilst the iron is hot. I will see her to-night, and I hope with all my heart that it may be for the last time.'

'To-night?' I asked him. 'Will it not be better to think so serious a matter over?'

'No,' he answered; 'it will be time enough to consult the lawyers when the business comes to be arranged. Give me the address, and I will go at once.'

Now, both for Mary's sake and for his own, I was anxious that he should not go at once, because I knew how painful to both of them a meeting would be, and if he should reach his wife's chamber before I had time to give warning an encounter was inevitable. I had of set purpose with-

held her name from the narrative I had given him.

He threw off his coat and walked into the bedroom, where he began to wash his hands, looking round the doorway at me meanwhile.

'Give me the address,' he said, 'and I will go and get it over.

'I will leave you then for a time,' I answered. 'I have business which I must see to immediately.'

I scrawled the address upon an envelope which lay on a side table, called his attention to it, and seized my hat. He called to me to meet him there again in an hour's time, if I were free, and throwing back a hasty affirmative I hurried away. Before I left his chambers I was guilty of another mean expedient. There was a catch upon the outer door which could be liberated, as I knew from old experience, by a mere touch of the finger, but gave considerable trouble and demanded considerable patience for its re-adjustment. I let this slip, and having slammed the door behind me,

ran swiftly down the stairs, along the court, and into Holborn. There, as chance would have it, I found a cab waiting by the kerb, and leaping in, gave the cabman the address, and bade him drive his hardest. Like most people, I have tried Time's different paces, and have known him at one time or another to gallop and amble and crawl. But he never crawled with me as he did in the course of that wretched twenty minutes' drive. If I had painstakingly gone about to discover the worst-horsed hansom at that hour in London I could hardly have found anything to excel in badness the mournful brute I sat behind. A hundred times I was on the point of leaping from the vehicle, but the cabman had made a turning into a neighbourhood where I was extremely unlikely to find another conveyance, and I was uncertain of the shortest route between the point I was at and the one I desired to reach. I bullied and implored the driver, and the man responded by thrashing the miserable steed until I was ashamed

of myself for abetting the cruelty. Even thus we achieved only the wretchedest pace, and by the time we had reached the house I was burning with a feverish impatience.

Even when I had rung and knocked the misfortune of delay pursued me. The servants of the house might have been deaf, or dead, or miles away. I was in the act of ringing the third or fourth distracted peal when the door was opened by the landlady in person, who regarded me with a frozen air of hauteur, as if I had been guilty of a personal impropriety. I hurried past her without explanation or apology, and mounting the stairs knocked at the door of the antechamber. The nurse answered here expeditiously enough, and I demanded Sister Constance. I was in the very act of speaking when the knocker on the street door came into play again, and this time the call was responded to without delay. I had been so pressing in my speech to the nurse that she ran to the door of the sick-chamber. She opened it

slightly, and threw in a hasty and expressive whisper.

'Sister Constance, Mr. Denham must speak to you at once.'

It is very commonly said that one cannot listen to two things at the same time. But after the experience of that moment I knew this to be a fallacy. I heard Mary's response, even the rustle of her dress as she approached me from the next room, whilst I listened for, heard, and understood, Pole's voice below.

'I believe Lady Worborough is here?'

'Yes, sir,' said the landlady.

'I am her husband. I must see her, if you please.'

'This way, your lordship,' said the landlady. 'Mind the mat, my lord. You will find the poor lady very ill, my lord.'

Mary Delamere and I stood face to face, both hearing this. She was white and trembling, and looked about her as if searching a way of escape from the inevitable encounter. The room opened flush upon the landing at

the top of the stair, and there was no exit from it save that which led into the bedroom. The bedroom and the anteroom were isolated, and to retreat was but to defer the meeting for a moment.

'I came to warn you,' I said. I could say no more before Pole, still my lorded by the landlady, entered the room. The gaslight shone full upon Mary's face, and in spite of the change in her attire, he recognised her at the very instant when he crossed the threshold. They stood, pale and palpitating, for a moment, looking at each other, but the common surprise and emotion lasted but for an instant. They were lovers confessed, and bound to each other by all ties of mutual respect and tenderness, and severed in this strange and tragic fashion, but they were English lady and gentleman, and whatever either or both might feel, they would have no scene for unsympathetic eyes to make a feast of. Pole was, I think, the first to recover, though his surprise was the swifter and more astonish-

ing. He came forward with outstretched hand.

'I had not expected,' he said, 'to find you here. It is like your goodness. I am very grateful.'

Mary took the hand he proffered her. Probably she divined with native feminine tact that I had told my share in the discovery without mention of her. She shot a swift glance at me, and answered him with apparent perfect self-possession—

'Mr. Denham and I were together when I heard of your wife's illness.'

She made a motion to release her hand, and that I thought was the first intimation he had that he still held it. The landlady and the nurse looking on could have gathered nothing from this interview but the fact that they were old acquaintances.

'It is like your goodness to be here,' Pole said again. 'I am very grateful.'

'Lady Worborough,' said Mary, 'does not know that you are yet in England. You

wish to see her?' He nodded gravely. 'Shall I tell her of your arrival, or would you prefer to announce yourself?'

'It will be best, perhaps,' he responded, 'that she should be prepared.'

Mary passed into the bedroom, and Pole sat down in a chair by the table which stood in the centre of the room. The landlady withdrew lingeringly, and the nurse followed and closed the door behind her. Pole had not until now seemed to be aware of my presence, but as the door closed he looked round upon me with an odd smile, and laid a hand upon my shoulder.

'I spent two minutes over the latch, Jack,' he said. 'Was that your work?' I answered nothing, but I suppose I looked somewhat embarrassed. 'Well,' he continued, giving my shoulder a light grip before he dropped his hand, 'you are good people, and I don't know why such a worthless pair should trouble you.'

I made no answer to this, but one thought

which demanded instant expression flashed into my mind.

'You must give no hint,' I told him, 'that your wife's nurse is Miss Delamere. She is known here simply as Sister Constance.'

I had scarcely spoken when Mary stole back from the sick woman's chamber.

'She knows that you are here,' she whispered.

Pole walked into the bedroom, and Mary closed the door behind him. We who stayed behind rested in silence and could hear the deep tones of his voice and the shriller notes of hers, though the words spoken by each were alike inaudible. When we had stood thus for a mere moment Mary made a motion towards the outer door, and I, obeying that indication of her wish, opened the door for her, and accompanied her into the street. We walked for some distance without any exchange of words, and when I had found a cab and had directed the driver homewards, I walked back to Pole's chambers, and awaited

his coming there. He arrived sooner than I had expected.

'I have surrendered all along the line,' he said.

I asked him how his wife had accepted the surrender.

'Triumphantly,' he answered. 'She is a good deal changed. I have had no experience in such matters, but she looked to me as though she had a sort of fatal mark upon her. I don't think she'll last long, the poor Adelaide. She wasn't always like that, Jack. I remember her—it isn't so very long ago, when she was bright and handsome, and only prettily wilful. I feel as if it were a thousand years ago.'

He walked up and down the room very much in his habitual fashion, with his hands in his pockets, and pausing now and then to loll against a bookcase or a door jamb, but it was easy to see that these airs of nonchalance were half an affair of habit, and half assumed.

'You have done everything for the best,

of course,' he said. 'Who is attending her?'

I mentioned Dr. Mason, and he, recognising the name, nodded approval. A little later, he asked the doctor's opinion, and I gave it him as well as I was able. The case was doubtful, and might drag on for a year or two, or might have an early termination.

'Poor girl!' said Pole. 'I wish that something or somebody would kill that mocking devil she nurses and seems so fond of. She lay there to-night and told me so quietly that at first I thought she was in earnest, that this was a judgment upon her for her plot against me. The woman she personated was knocked down by a passing cab, and was taken to the same hospital.'

'She jested about that?' I asked him.

'Yes,' he answered, 'she jested about it. She has a great deal of humour—of a sort.'

Then again he was silent, and went wandering up and down.

'And this is what she has brought her

life to. And this is what I have brought my life to. Here I am at thirty, where I never hoped to be or expected to be, without a use in the world or much of a hope in it.' His voice began to tremble, and, as I could see clearly enough, he ceased to speak for fear of breaking down. By and by, when he had controlled himself, he began to talk again. 'There are all sorts in the world, good, bad, and indifferent. That girl's an angel, Denham,' he cried, almost wildly. 'I think of her goodness, her loneliness, her patience, the unselfish, tender charity of her heart——'

He could go no further. His voice broke, and he walked into the bedroom, leaving me alone. When he came back he was master of himself again.

'I shall see my lawyer to-morrow. My wife wants that fellow Goldsmith to see to her affairs, and since she wants him she must have him, I suppose. I have an undertaking that there is to be no more scandal or trouble, and I shall settle down in London

here, and try to find work of some sort. I don't care much about politics, but they're better than nothing, and by and by I shall find something to hammer at. *Sursum corda.* Eh, Jack? We set out thinking that it is easy to beat the world, and when we find ourselves beaten we console ourselves with the reflection that we might have had a much worse licking after all.'

CHAPTER XXXVI

It was one thing to decide that Lady Worborough was at liberty to take up her residence at Worborough Court, and another thing for her ladyship to get there. The mere shock of the accident from which she had suffered would have killed some women outright. The bout of starvation by which she was content to follow it might of itself have resulted fatally. She must have been blessed with a noble constitution to begin with, though in one way at least she had been doing her best to ruin it for years past, and even now her passionate and imperious will continued to assert itself. She would go to Worborough Court. The doctor assured her that she might die upon the way, and declined

to sanction her removal. All the same, she would go to Worborough Court.

'My dear madam,' said the doctor, 'it is at present impossible for you to make a journey. Perhaps in the course of a week or two it may be safe to remove you. At present it would be little less than criminal to attempt it.'

My lady hereupon became certain that the doctor was a member of that widespread society which conspired to rob her of her rights—her right by this time being clearly defined as the right to do, at any given moment, precisely what she wished. He had entered into a compact with Lord Worborough to keep her a prisoner in that horrible house. She stormed and raved herself into a condition of utter weakness, and for four or five days afterwards lay quite helpless at the benevolent mercy of doctors and nurses. When she had recovered strength enough to venture on a second outburst she indulged herself. She would go to Wor-

borough Court or die. They had almost killed her by throwing her into a rage. They knew her infirmity of temper, and they all worked upon it and traded on it. They wanted to find a means to kill her safely, but she would disappoint them, banded cheats and villains as they were. She threw the whole household into chaos on this occasion, and refused to be quieted until she had raged herself once more to a standstill, and could no longer articulate a word.

I learned all this, and something more, from Dr. Mason, who now made a call upon the patient daily. There are few people whose passive endurance of foolish whims and unreasonable rages can be compared with that of a doctor, and Mason, who had had an experience extraordinary alike for extent and variety, had at one time practised in lunacy, and was as little affected by her ladyship's wild tantrums as glass is affected by water.

'The fact is,' he told me, 'there is an

actual discernible touch of madness in these displays of rage. The woman begins, so far as sanity is a thing to be measured, in a frame of mind as sane as yours or mine. But she starts with the definite intention of handing herself over to delirium, and she does it. If she likes to kill herself nobody can be very sorry, and nobody can prevent her from doing it.'

This talk took place in my own study, rather late one night, when the doctor had seen his last patient for the day, and could afford to smoke his sole cigar. He prized that nightly enjoyment very dearly, and as he was in great request amongst ladies it was only possible for him at a time when he could make tolerably sure that none of his patients would send for him. Knowing my intimacy with Pole he was pretty free in his comments on the situation, and Lady Worborough's character appeared to interest him deeply.

'It's a queer room that,' he said, 'with its two opposites in it. It's really a little

astonishing to reflect that they belong to the same species. Lady Worborough doesn't guess who her nurse is, and in an odd sort of way she's developing a liking for her. Not that there's anything astonishing in that, *per se.* Almost anybody might be excused for taking a liking to Miss Delamere. By the way,' he interjected, 'I have been once or twice in danger of making trouble. Meeting Miss Delamere here without that Sister of Mercy raiment of hers, I have been half inclined to forget my old acquaintance, Sister Constance. She lives in my mind as Miss Delamere. I think of her as Miss Delamere, and my instinct is to speak of her as Miss Delamere. Now that instinct might bring about an awkward position if it were yielded to in Lady Worborough's presence. You understand me, Denham. I'm not disputing the goodness or beauty of the action. But women have a curious love of romance. They like to find themselves in romantic and picturesque situations. It is meat and drink to

a woman to be a living part in a moving story. We drudge along, contented with our daily duties, and after four or five-and-twenty have no particular desire to be mixed up with wonders. But a woman is never tired of the romantic aspect of things. I'm a great believer in the sex myself, and a great admirer of it, but if you'll look at the question, a great many of the best feminine qualities are bound up with this love of romance, and are almost a part of it. A woman of ninety is just as ready to discover a romance as a girl of sixteen. They never tire of it.'

For my part I have never been too fond of analysing human motives, when they happen to be either good in themselves or to lead to good results. It may be worth while to analyse the motives of a rascal, and to discover the grounds he has for self-excuses, and thereby to minimise one's natural loathing for him. But though some find it amusing and instructive, I have never cared to

macerate the motives of the good in search of the one possible thread of folly or of meanness which may run through them. There are plenty of people in the world who are willing to take up that task, and I prefer the other. So I declined to follow up the question of feminine romantic instinct which the doctor had started.

'You really think,' I asked, 'that Lady Worborough is growing attached to Miss Delamere?'

'Bless you, yes,' returned the doctor, who, though profoundly good-hearted, was yet a bit of a cynic in his way. 'I've seen a sort of affection displayed by a rattlesnake for its keeper.'

I had hardly intended to put the question in that light. I had been bred in the belief, though I have since had to abandon it, that there is in every human creature somewhere to be found a touch of goodness, and I was certainly very far from believing Lady Worborough to be amongst the most inhuman of

her kind. She was passionate and scornful and self-willed, and had been guilty in intention of one most cruel and terrible crime, but it had not occurred to me to place her outside the reach of human sympathy. Indeed, I thought it very likely that if the key to her heart could but be found there might be a chamber in it somewhere yet, where some relics of affection and tenderness were stored. I thought that Mary Delamere was as likely as any creature in the world to find that chamber, and even to be welcomed into it.

'We have had to pack off the hired nurse to-day,' the doctor continued, as he nursed his solitary cigar, and made the most of his enjoyment of it. 'She is an excellent woman, and I have sent in a report of her conduct which I fancy will be of use to her. But her ladyship either couldn't endure her, or made up her mind that she wouldn't endure her. The nurse stuck to it like a Briton, but when at last it was decided that she should go she was the happiest woman in London.

I have sent in another to succeed her, but she is a copper-haired lady of peppery temperament, and I fancy there will be another rupture very soon. In point of fact her ladyship's shindies with the nurse were not intended to do much more than to express a preference for Miss Delamere. If ever she grows strong enough to be removed to Worborough Court she will want Miss Delamere to accompany her. She's quite sufficiently ungracious and disagreeable with the companion of her choice, but with everybody else she is a constant brash of bitter waters. There are loads of people in the world who, if they were invited to discriminate between Richard the Saint and Robert the Sinner, couldn't for their lives endure to say that Richard was better than Robert. They'd say that Robert was worse than Richard, and find it soothing to themselves to indicate the difference in that fashion. In a really benevolent humour they might say he was a great deal worse; but they wouldn't get

higher than that. It's Lady Worborough's fashion of complimenting Miss Delamere to fly into rages with the paid attendants. It's noticeable that she never flies into a rage with her.'

He went on smoking with that air of subdued, intense enjoyment which is only displayed by the self-denying devotee of tobacco, and shortly resumed.

'There's another thing, my boy. Miss Delamere's a lady, and Lady Worborough is not a lady, and in her secret soul she's afraid of her attendant's breeding. She dare not launch out on her as she does at everybody else. It's curious, when you come to think of it, how important we all are to ourselves. It hurts us to be despised, and above all things in the world we can't afford to despise ourselves. To despise one's self is a thing that most men of sense arrive at, at one time or another; but nobody does it willingly, any more willingly than he puts his hand in the fire. And, don't you see, when you

want to conserve your own good opinion, it's useful to have just a little shred of somebody else's to train it by. Anything will serve. The blankest, barest wall in the world is good enough for ivy to cling to, or the rottenest old tree-trunk that ever got ready to tumble. But the healthiest hop or scarlet-runner won't grow without what we call a risel in my part of the country. It must have a stick to hold on to.'

He took a long pull at his cigar, and after rolling the smoke about enjoyingly in his mouth, expelled it by the nostrils, and went on again, with the air of a man satisfied with his own philosophic attitude.

'If I were a betting man I'd bet a million sterling to a halfpenny that in case Lady Worborough should ever be strong enough to go down to Devonshire Miss Delamere goes with her. I can see her winding her coils about her closer and closer day by day. I doubt if she'd care to take the trouble if she knew her nurse's real name; but she's making

up to her bit by bit, and leading her as to believe that she's the only creature in the world to cling to, and flattering her with the belief that she can soften her, and believing in it just a little bit, mind you, and being softened just a little bit in reality. There's a lot of human nature in man, my young friend, and we are mostly made up of humbug.'

'Come, come, doctor,' I urged; 'is there any humbug on the other side?'

'Did you ever,' the doctor asked me in return, 'read Pascal's panegyric on salt? I could write a similar panegyric, if I were to give my mind to it, on humbug. It holds the world together. Kill it outright, and you would kill benevolence, philanthropy, love, and friendship. Everything includes a bit of make-believe.'

I fought hotly against this shameful heresy; but the doctor refused all challenges to personal example, and sheltered himself behind the ample breastwork afforded by generalities.

'Well,' he said at last, 'you fight in defence of your goddess very pluckily. Of course I have the best of the argument, and have had all along. That goes without saying. But if you need it for your comfort, I don't mind admitting—she isn't a goddess; but she's a rare good woman, and if we were all like her we should be ready for the millennium.'

'We should be more than ready for it,' I responded; 'we should be living in it.'

'Well,' he answered, with a deep, rolling laugh, which I had discovered to be in him a most expansive expression of good-fellowship, 'if you set any store by Miss Delamere's society, you'd better keep an eye upon the patient. She's trying her best to wean her away from you, and to enlist her in her own cause.' He rose, and threw the remnant of his cigar into the fire, stretching out his arms afterwards in an abandonment of rest, looking smilingly at me the while.

'Denham,' he said, with sudden seriousness, 'I don't often talk about these things. It's my business to attend to ailments which are purely physical, and I don't pry into the spiritual machinery any farther than is necessary for my purposes. But I saw a sight this afternoon. I have told you already how Lady Worborough's twining herself about Miss Delamere. When I went in to see her this afternoon she was sitting propped up on a bed-rest in a heap of pillows, and Miss Delamere was sitting at the bedside. They were holding one another's hands, and Miss Delamere was reading out of the Bible. Nice, pretty, clear, grave voice she has.' He said this with an air of transparent commonplace, which I took to be somewhat exaggerated.

'There is a good deal of humbug in the world, doctor,' I said quietly. He pretended for an instant not to see my drift, and then responded—

'You're quite right, Denham. There was

a little bit of it there; but it was all on one side.'

I asked him why the unhappy woman should not be drawn towards some tender and sacred thoughts by Mary's constant patience and kindness.

'I dare say she is a little bit,' he answered. 'But she pretends to a good deal more than she feels. She wants to have a lady about her. She wants to feed her own sense of self-esteem. There may be some affection mixed with it, but it isn't very real. And when you know, as well as I do, what a general hash alcohol can make of the human emotions, you may come to be of my opinion about a good many pyrotechnic displays which excite admiration and wonder just at present, and set your own internal fireworks going by the mere contact of a spark.'

'I shall have some hope,' I said, 'if Lady Worborough begins on any ground to care for Miss Delamere. Do you think she will ever be able to go to Worborough Court?'

'If she could command her temper,' he responded, 'she might gain strength in a week or a fortnight; but the whole thing is a question of time. She won't last a year, and if she goes on fretting herself as she does, she'll wear herself out in half the time. *Tant mieux*, say I. But then I'm a brute and a cynic, and a believer in the doctrines of Utopia.'

I saw no more of him, and learned no more of the actual progress of this history for a week. At the end of that time he came again. Clara had some slight ailment which really demanded no particular care, and he came more for the pleasure of a chat with me than for professional reasons. I was able to offer him the cigar he liked best, for in that matter, as it happened, our tastes agreed, though we found ourselves differing widely on matters of far greater importance.

'Her ladyship will take possession,' he said. 'There is a mighty change for the better in her ways and manners. She goes

now like sweet oil upon a whetstone. She has got a kind of mania to the effect that we are all in a conspiracy to kill her by pretending that she can't go down to Worborough Court because she isn't strong enough, and so leading her on to outbursts of temper. Now, with a kind of half-crazed cunning, for in point of fact that's what it actually comes to, she has made up her mind to defeat our machinations, and has taken up the line of the resigned and suffering martyr. She does whatever she is told to do. She takes her medicine and her food with the most touching submissiveness, always with a plainly expressed belief that they are poisoned for her, and she clings to Miss Delamere with a surprising tenderness. She hasn't slanged the copper-haired nurse this four days, and everybody is touched by her resignation and newborn gentleness. Meantime, I have discovered that a little servant has been bribed with promises to smuggle in brandy and laudanum. I anticipate an outburst, but

I have been compelled to see that young woman out of the house. I offered to bet you a million sterling to a halfpenny that Miss Delamere would accompany her. Now, I will give the solar system against a used lucifer match Miss Delamere will go if Lady Worborough goes.'

CHAPTER XXXVII

It was not only from Dr. Mason that I had news of the change which had taken place in Lady Worborough. Night after night Mary returned full of it, and opened her heart to Clara and myself without reserve. She had none of the doctor's practised knowledge of the world, and I do not believe that all the knowledge of its own ways the world could bring her could ever have taught her his fashion of looking at things.

'She is softening,' she would say. 'She is so changed I hardly know her. She clings to me in a way which I find very touching, and sometimes the poor thing makes allusions to the past and the sad mistakes of her own life, which almost bring tears into my eyes.

She is very unhappy and very much alone. I asked her this afternoon about her friends. She gave a little dreary laugh. "My friends! I have worn them out years ago. I have no friends."'

This, I am fain to confess, sounded more real than Dr. Mason's account would have led me to think it. But then, in this story as in every other, so much depended on the telling. The doctor told it cynically, and was more than half right, I dare say. Mary told it sympathetically, and I fancy she was not much more than half wrong.

By and by, to my own surprise, came an invitation to myself. Why, the sick woman demanded, did Mr. Denham keep away? The most obvious answer to that query was that Mr. Denham had had no reason for going; but when the inquiry was once made there was nothing for it but to accept the invitation it indicated, and to pay Lady Worborough a visit. I was the readier to do this because of the conflicting nature of the testimony I

received about her. I was a little anxious to see for myself how far the change in her manner was real and how far assumed, if assumed at all. I made my way to the house the following afternoon, and after a little pause was shown into her ladyship's chamber. She was certainly a great deal improved in aspect since we had first lighted upon her in Green Hill Court, and the memory of what she had looked like then made so strong a contrast with her present aspect that she looked much better than she really was. When the first effect of surprise had left my mind, I saw that there was still something of that same ghastly fatal look which I had remarked before. Everybody who has been in close attendance upon an invalid doomed to a long and lingering illness, and doomed past recovery, sees these strange fluctuations of expression. The sick face brightens and fills out, but visible under that surface improvement the unmistakable marks lie scarcely disguised.

She held out a weak thin right hand as I approached her, and I confess that, as I took it in my own, the unexpected gesture of amity and welcome made a considerable impression upon me.

I asked after her health, and she responded with a feeble lightness that she was better, much better.

'The doctor shakes his head, but then he is not here to encourage me. That is no part of his business, but I know from my own feelings that I am mending very fast. By and by I shall be running about again.'

One could say nothing to kill a hope like that, or even to chill it by a breath, but ignorant as I was I knew better than to believe it. I managed to say something about courage being of infinite use in such a case, but she seemed to take little heed of my answer, and only motioned me to a seat.

'Sister Constance tells me,' she said, 'that she has known you for quite a long time. You are not like the others. I can see that

for myself. You are a great friend of Lord Worborough's?'

In one interview already chronicled she had alluded to my intimacy with her husband in terms which were anything but flattering. I recalled them now, and though it would have been absurd enough to remember them with malice or with anger against a creature so afflicted, the remembrance certainly saved me from accepting her present overtures with too great alacrity. I answered simply that her husband was the greatest friend I had in the world, and waited to hear further.

'You look unsuspicious,' she said, 'and you are not very old. But I wonder that you have not found him out.' I thought that I knew most that was to be found out about him already, but I said nothing. 'That, however,' she went on, with a martyred smile which gave me the first real clue to her temper and intention, 'was not what I wanted to talk to you about. I want you to

carry a message to Lord Worborough. Will you take it for me?'

'Certainly,' I answered.

Mary was standing gravely at the foot of the bed with a piece of sewing in her hands. I gave an involuntary glance at her, which she did not see. I had a feeling of awkwardness in conducting any conversation about Pole in her presence, but it was not to be avoided, and the only thing to do was to go through it without betraying either her or myself.

'You will not believe what I am going to tell you,' said Lady Worborough, 'but it is true all the same.' Her manner bespoke so remarkable a resignation, so profound a certainty beforehand of being misunderstood, or even maligned, and gave so ostentatious a prophecy of forgiveness, that I was ready for almost anything in the way of mischievous suggestion. 'I have resolved not to be disturbed by it any further, because I can see that my only hope of safety lies in keeping quite calm and quiet. Dr. Mason and nurse

James, who went away, and the nurse who is now here, and one or two others whom I could name, have had instructions from Lord Worborough. The doctor was so foolishly candid as to tell me that my only chance of recovery lay in keeping quiet, and since he let that slip I have contrived perfectly to battle his lordship's intentions.'

'And his lordship's intentions are——?'

'Lord Worborough,' she answered, with a smile which expressed at once knowledge of her own shortcomings and forgiveness for this injurious husband, 'Lord Worborough knows my infirmity of temper.' I thought that very much more than probable. I thought of one or two of the horrible scenes Pole had sketched for me, and I recalled the exhibitions I myself had seen. 'He has instructed his creatures to do their best to betray me into fits of violence, and his object, of course, was to bring about his own freedom. You know how anxious he has been to be rid of me, Mr. Denham. When that

absurd and groundless report of my death was circulated, he made no inquiry. He set up a stone to my memory over the body of a stranger.'

I answered that I was intimately acquainted with the whole history of that episode, and she gave me just one swift sidelong glance in quite the old fashion. It was as quick as a glance well could be. It lasted no longer than a flash of lightning, but it illuminated everything, just as a flash of lightning will. Her ladyship, however, was not playing to me alone. She had an audience of two, and I suppose she fancied that she was carrying half of it with her. She must have known beforehand that I knew too much to be cheated in that barefaced way.

'I have asked you,' she said, 'to carry a message to Lord Worborough, and you have promised.' I inclined my head in silent assent to this, but I began to guess what the character of the message was to be, and to

think it very unlikely that her husband would receive it at my hands. 'You may tell him, if you please,' she continued, 'that sickness has not had the effect upon me which he anticipated. I am a good deal subdued by it, and in place of being more easily angry, I find that I am growing patient. The doctor's indiscretion was a great help to me, and Sister Constance helps me continually. You may tell Lord Worborough that I am armed against any annoyance he may bring to bear upon me. I am resolved to live, and I am resolved to get strong enough to go to Worborough Court as soon as possible.'

Mary had taken a seat near the foot of the bed, and was sewing with apparent tranquillity, though the red spot which burned upon the pallor of her cheek told me something of what was going on within doors.

'That is the message you desire me to deliver to your husband?' I asked her. It would be futile to pretend that I was not angry, but it would have been more futile

still by far to have shown anger there. I took a leaf out of her ladyship's book, and was almost as meek and long-suffering in manner as herself.

'That is my message,' she responded.

I told her I would willingly do anything in my power to oblige her. 'But your ladyship will see,' I urged, 'that if I take this message—if I even so much as name it to him, I shall at least give myself the air of thinking it worth mention.'

'You decline to take it, then?' Her voice was quite sweet and amiable, but I got another quick illuminating glance before she spoke.

'I am afraid,' I answered, 'that I must decline to take it. I cannot even appear to share in your belief.'

'Will you ask Lord Worborough to call upon me,' she asked, 'so that I myself may give him the message?'

'I must beg your ladyship's pardon still,' I answered.

'Oh, my ladyship, my ladyship!' she said, in a tone of gentle irony. 'What has a poor stricken creature like myself to do with earthly titles of honour?'

I answered, 'What indeed?' in a tone as near her own as I could make it. It was not kindly, I dare say, but I was growing a little sick of the savage farce she played, and was willing to end it as soon as might be. Mary glanced up at me with a startled and almost frightened look, and half arose as if in anticipation of an outburst. But Lady Worborough merely turned her head upon her pillows, and looked at me with a glance of amused intelligence. It was the very first sign of humour I had seen in her, and I was both relieved and pleased. I had regretted my words as soon as I had spoken them, but her ladyship was in the mind for self-control, and was evidently determined not to be shaken from it.

'So,' she said, 'you will not even ask Lord Worborough to come here?'

'To listen to that accusation? No, madam. I cannot undertake to do it. Lord Worborough is in London, and if you have any serious reason for wishing to see him, I am sure he will come to you with all reasonable speed. But you are armed so strong in patience that you can afford to allow these wicked machinations to go on unnoticed.'

'I should like them to be put a stop to,' she said, with a resigned sigh at failure. 'I know my own infirmities, as I have told you. My temper is not of the best, even now.'

I was wise enough to keep to myself my own opinions upon that matter, and when I had sat in silence for some time she stretched out her weak and wasted hand again with an expression of tolerance and meekness which would have done credit to a saint. I was unregenerate enough to rejoice in the certainty that she was greatly disappointed in not having made me angry, and that she was boiling inwardly beneath that sanctified calm

of hers. I had a more legitimate ground for satisfaction in the fact that the interview had come to an end with no outbreak on either side.

'I am not angry at your refusal, Mr. Denham,' she said, 'though I am disappointed by it. I had hoped that you would take my message. I like you, and I hope that we may see more of each other.'

This was a wish I could not echo, but I got over my leave-taking with as good a grace as possible, and left the house, glad that the ordeal was at an end. Walking homeward, I had time to think things over, and I came to two definite conclusions with respect to her ladyship's condition and intentions. She had about as much belief in that story about Pole and the conspiracy between him, the doctor, and the nurses, as I myself had. But the change in the manifestation of that remarkable temper was real, and had a real purpose. She had discovered that it was possible to get almost as much satisfac-

tion out of the act of maddening other people as by maddening herself.

It was so much more wholesome, so much safer in her present condition, that the discovery naturally tempted her towards experiment. Then, above all other things, she wanted to get down to Worborough Court, and to establish her reign there. Thinking how brief her triumph must be, attended with how many pains of mind and body, I began almost to wonder at myself for having grudged it. When your enemy is strong and knows how to be harmful, and you have a right to dread his implacable, unsleeping hate, it comes natural to the heart to hate him in return; but when he lies vanquished and helpless, or even when his capacity for mischief is strictly measured and confined, you can begin to pity the gnawing miseries of his disappointment. I have disliked one or two people very strongly in my time, but I have never hated anybody. I have thought sometimes with Hamlet that I was pigeon-

livered and lacked gall to make oppression bitter. But I have known good haters—without loving them—and have, in a vague and shadowy way, no doubt, savoured in imagination the bitterness of the gall which poisoned life to them. Of all people in the world I know none so pitiable. Hate is the true Tantalus torture. It cannot be slaked. Of its very nature it refuses to be satisfied. To satisfy it were to kill it, and it craves for immortality, alike for its victim and itself. I am not speaking of dislikes which pass for hatred, but of the real, royal thing itself.

As for poor Lady Worborough, it was surely worth no man's or woman's while to stir her venom, let her make what outward show of it she might. I am not master of the technicalities of the case, but, if I remember rightly what Dr. Mason told me, the paralysis was mounting, seizing little by little; like an enemy advancing across a whole country, slowly, driving life before it step by step. Her general aspect, to the untaught

eye, would have seemed all the while to improve with considerable regularity, and she herself was fully persuaded that her ultimate recovery was certain if she could but repress those outbursts of passion which she now recognised as being dangerous to her.

In the course of two or three weeks Mary brought intelligence of the doctor's permission for the desired journey. We got news of clasped petitionary hands, and prayers and tears from Lady Worborough to Sister Constance. She would not, could not, go without her. She was bent on going, would brave death itself to go, but the great lonely, friendless house frightened her. It was quite conceivable even then, though I did not realise it until later, that her ladyship's lie had grown into a reality for her, and that she really dreaded to be left altogether alone amongst strangers for other than merely sentimental reasons.

Mary took the whole matter with that direct simplicity which was a part of her.

'I have promised to go with her,' she said, in answer to Clara, who at first was strongly opposed to the idea. 'If I had met her in another way, or had learned of her suffering in another way, it might have been different. I cannot leave her now. I believe,' she added frankly, 'that I am the only creature in the world she cares for and the only one she trusts. I must stay with her until the end.'

It was so impossible, all things considered, to discuss the question, and the whole position of affairs was so unprecedented, that we were compelled to say very little about the decision. I received another message from Lady Worborough, requesting me to call upon her, but I was convinced that she was using me as a sort of instrument through which she might possibly play upon her husband, and at first I sent back word that I was otherwise engaged and could not then find time to visit her. The message was repeated, this time through Mary.

'She wants John,' said Mary, turning upon Clara, 'to accompany us to Worborough Court. For my part I should be glad if he would do it. I do not think that she will try to make things uncomfortable by the way.'

'Go,' said Clara. 'I should like to know that Mary was comfortably installed there. And mind, my dear'—this was addressed to Mary, and spoken with much vivacity and determination—'you are not to make a martyr of yourself down there. That woman is quite capable of asking you to accompany her down there for no other purpose than to make your life unbearable. And now I come to think of it, I shall be very glad if Lady Worborough has taken a fancy to John and wants to see him often. I don't care much what her purpose is if the freak only brings me pretty constant news of you. You will go and see Lady Worborough, John, as often as you are asked, and you will keep your eyes open and let me know the truth about what is going on down there. I am not

going to lose Mary, or have her hurt, for all the Lady Worboroughs in the world.'

I called on Dr. Mason that evening, and learned from him that his permission for the journey had actually been given. The doctor who attended the case under him was to accompany the patient and to spend a day or two with her. He would carry with him notes of the case and instruct any local practitioner Lady Worborough might choose. There were three or four great houses within a radius of four or five miles, and a considerable number of wealthy residents, so that it was quite certain that there would be some really capable medical man in the neighbourhood.

During this time I saw but little of Pole. Notwithstanding the close friendship between us, it was impossible that he should be a visitor at my house during Mary's stay there, and he had taken up his residence in a dreary little villa by the river, a dozen miles from town. On his invitation I visited him there

the day before the intended emigration to Worborough.

'My wife,' he said, 'has refused to sign the document of peace between us until she can sign it at Worborough. You are going down with her? I heard as much from the lawyer. Goldsmith is to be there to meet her. I shall take my seat in the House at the beginning of the session and start on work of some kind. I have two or three ideas floating about in my mind, but I haven't decided yet. Miss Delamere is well?' He put the question with an odd abruptness which it was easy for me to understand. I told him all about her, and I told him also of the engagement his wife had attempted to lay upon me. It was one thing to tell him that I had refused the office, and another to have been her ladyship's messenger. 'That would look a little like madness,' he said, 'and I would rather think that she had not been altogether responsible for herself all along. Mason tells me that her life is a question of

months only, and it would help me to the state of mind I want to get into if I could think it was not herself who has done all the mischief. It's a hard matter to trace responsibility at any time, and the people who sin are in the main the people who are punished. She has suffered enough for all her sins, even if she went to them with her eyes open, for they were of a sort which bring their own punishment.'

I believe that after this, until the end, and beyond the end of that tragic episode, when he was happy and useful, and found full scope for the exercise of all his gifts, he never nourished an angry thought or spoke a bitter word about his wife. I had not been sure of my own wisdom in telling him the story, but since it persuaded him that she had all along been irresponsible, and since it helped him to forgive her, and to be tender and pitiful in his thoughts of her, I could hardly have done a wiser or more friendly act.

Next day we started off, Mary, the young

doctor, and I, accompanying the invalid towards that installation for which Lady Worborough longed so passionately. Pole had sent his carriage to convey the patient to the railway station, and her eyes glittered with pride at the sight of the equipage and the liveried servants. There was another servant in waiting for us at the terminus, deputed to accompany us upon our journey, and at the few halting-places on the way he appeared at the door of the railway carriage to know if his services were in any way required. After each of these visits the poor woman brightened perceptibly, and when we had once passed Exeter her spirits mounted almost to fever heat. The sight of two other carriages waiting for her at the local station, and of more liveried servants, so excited her with pride and the sense of conquest that, what with triumph and fatigue, she had to wipe away a tear or two.

She had been to Worborough Court before, but not under similar auspices. On her first

visit she had conquered the place, as it were, by sudden stealth and stratagem; now she came like its mistress, and was received with honours, which to her eyes must have seemed almost regal. She was carried to her own carriage and laid down in it amidst the wondering gazes of a score of onlookers and loungers, and then we were all borne swiftly and smoothly off, the young doctor and I bringing up the rear. The lodge gates swung open before us, and we drove up the long curved avenue between the stately trees which stood grim and gaunt against the fading brightness of the upper skies. The house gleamed with lights, and the hall, from the outer dimness, shone with a golden splendour. The doctor leapt down from my side to superintend the conduct of Lady Worborough to her room. She carried a fan in her hand, and as she was borne past the lintel she stretched out her arm and struck it, as if to say that she claimed it for her own.

She was extremely prostrated by the jour-

ney, but she rallied for the moment, and turned her face towards Mary with an exalted smile.

'You are welcome, my dear,' she said, 'to Worborough Court.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII

She was carried at once to the chamber which had been made ready for her, and I was left alone. The housekeeper personally conducted me to my room. She had been there in the late Lord Worborough's time, and she and I were already acquainted with each other. I thought she lingered about me unnecessarily, and supposed that she was very curious, and eager to talk if I had but given her an opening. I made no conversational advances, and she was too well disciplined by long service to initiate operations, though I dare say it cost her a considerable effort to repress her desires that way. I sat for a long time alone, thinking of the paralysed woman brought to live in that great

lonely house and in that solitary, miserable splendour. There had been something melancholy from the first in the mere prospect of Pole's accession to wealth and title, and she, poor thing, had been the sole cause of the shadow which rested on that brilliant fortune. Even she herself became pitiable in the gloom for which she was herself responsible. She had only triumphed by force of her misery, and to have all and to enjoy nothing is surely a bitter and pitiable lot. I found my own thoughts such poor and unexhilarating company that I was well pleased indeed to be joined by the doctor. He also had begun to find the place oppressive, and he confided to me the fact that though he had never been so handsomely lodged or paid in the whole course of his life, he would be glad when he could get back to places less mournful, if less distinguished.

Goldsmith, who started from town an hour or two after our arrival at Worborough, appeared next morning rather less glossy and

smiling than usual, after a cold night's journey. Pole's lawyer travelled by the same train, but the two reached the Court by different vehicles, though within a few minutes of each other. It fell upon me to receive them both, and Goldsmith was evidently unhappy at my presence, which he could hardly have expected. When he had changed his dress and breakfasted, his native courage reasserted itself a little, and he made some faint overtures to talk. Pole's man of business was a very stately personage, who might himself have been the owner of the place, and he and Goldsmith were so far asunder that they might have been born in different planets. The little Jew solicitor was by no means as ready to recognise this difference as the man of higher standing, but it existed, and it made an impression even upon him. Pole's lawyer was a little ruffled, in a lofty way, at meeting a person of Mr. Goldsmith's aspect and manners, and once at least he gave him to understand in my hearing that

their meeting bore an exclusively business character.

'Old cock's a bit stuck-up, don't you think, Bister Dedham?' said Goldsmith, appealing to me. 'He's been longer in the professiod than I have, and I dare say he has a more profitable connectiod, but a solicitor's a gentleman, and nobody can be any more.'

He was propitiatory with me, and ill at ease in the remembrance of our last interview. I told him roundly that if Lord Worborough's solicitor knew what I could tell him he would have refused the meeting altogether. I added that nothing but his lordship's dread of scandal had saved Mr. Goldsmith from the ignominy of being struck from the rolls, and that I wondered somewhat at his audacity in coming there, even at Lady Worborough's command.

'Well,' he said, with a sort of desperate resignation, 'I shall never get anybody to understad what happened. You wait till you get Lady Worborough about you, Bister Dedham. There isn't much she couldn't make

you do if she set her wits to work about it. She ain't a bit like ad ordinary womad. Ad ordinary womad wouldn't have let me idto such a risk. You're no fool, you know, Bister Dedham, judging by the look of you. You'd dever have dreabt of taking on a risk like that. If anybody had told me *I* should do it I should have kicked him. I've kicked a man before to-day od a question of outraged honour. But Lady Worborough is exceptiodal. She's a very rebarkable persod, is Lady Worborough.'

Pole's lawyer, as I could see, was anxious to get his business over and begone, though since he could only catch the night train at earliest, and had no other affairs in the neighbourhood, he was as well placed at Worborough Court as elsewhere. Her ladyship certainly appeared to think so, for she made no haste to see him. The morning was, for the season of the year, particularly mild and sunny, and a little before noon she caused herself to be carried from her rooms

on the first floor, and was set into a bath-chair, which had been by her orders disinterred from the coach-house. It was a very ancient affair, and though it had been cleaned and furbished as completely as the time permitted, it sent a certain ghostly odour abroad upon the clear wintry air. Nothing less would satisfy Lady Worborough than that I should push her about the gravelled drive in this cumbrous and ancient vehicle. I received the request certainly with some surprise, and at first, as I confess, with a little anger, but it did not seem worth while to argue it, and I obeyed her wish. I had arranged already to go back to town with Pole's lawyer, and since my stay was so extremely brief, it seemed on the whole worth while to humour the stricken and self-willed creature.

'I want to drink in this lovely place,' she said, when I presented myself in obedience to her wish. 'Push me to a little distance, please, so that I can admire the house. I

feel very well and strong this morning, and the fresh air will do me good. I shall soon be walking about again, the doctors are quite confident of it.'

As a matter of fact the doctors were quite confident in an opposite opinion. Neither of them believed that she would ever walk again; but she so clung to her own belief, and so emphatically reiterated it in their presence, that she had to all appearance persuaded herself that they shared her view. She brooked no contradiction, and the slightest sign of it in respect to a desire so dearly cherished as this would arouse a dangerous paroxysm of anger.

When I had wheeled her to a distance of a hundred yards from the house she asked me to turn her round. She was buried to the chin in a dark fur rug, and she wore a black bonnet trimmed with scarlet. The sombre colour of her surroundings and the bright scarlet ribbon between them threw her face into a strongly accented pallor. Her thinned

features and bright dark eyes had an eerie and almost preternatural look. She called me to her side, and sat looking at the house, without speaking, for quite a considerable length of time. Then she turned her eyes upon me with a repetition of that same strange and exalted smile I had seen the night before.

'That is Worborough Court,' she said, nodding her head almost imperceptibly, 'and I'—with a repetition of the same slight gesture—'am Lady Worborough.'

There was something so odd in the tone and in the words that I could not help looking at her rather keenly. She took note of this, and answered my look with another smile, which seemed to cover a meaning of some sort, though I could not divine it.

'I am Lady Worborough,' she said, 'and that is Worborough Court. Those two gentlemen at the windows are the lawyers, I suppose. Oh yes, I recognise Mr. Goldsmith. Will you signal to them, if you

please? Wave your hat to them. They are bound to see you.'

I did as she requested, but the signal brought out Goldsmith alone. Pole's lawyer had either not seen it, or did not recognise it as being meant for him, or did not care to answer that informal summons.

'Wheel me a little farther,' said her ladyship. 'They will follow.'

I obeyed her again, and wheeled her away from the house with extreme slowness. Turning my head, I saw that Goldsmith was following us at a more rapid pace, and would soon overtake us. He came up with us in a while, panting somewhat, and her ladyship once more demanded to be turned round.

'That is my house, Mr. Goldsmith,' she said. 'I am pleased to offer you its hospitality.'

Goldsmith glanced at me, and a little later slipped behind the chair and whispered, 'I say.' He said nothing further, but tapped his forehead significantly. I feigned to take

no notice of him, and Lady Worborough asked in a cold, clear voice—

'What do you say?'

Goldsmith, with a sidelong look of dismay at me, answered confusedly that it was a very beautiful mansion.

'I am very glad,' she said, in a voice of satire, 'that it enlists your approval. Mr. Denham, let Mr. Goldsmith take your place. Come and talk to me. Mr. Goldsmith, wheel me towards the lodge. Stop when I tell you. I want to secure as many points of view as possible. It is one thing to watch the house as you approach it and another to turn round and secure different points of view when you are going away.'

Goldsmith followed her directions, as I had done before him, turning and pausing when she bade him, and turning round and going on again when she bade him. At each survey of the house she named it—'That is Worborough Court'—in a placid triumph. I did my best not to look at Goldsmith, but I knew

that he was making faces to attract my attention, and whenever I did look his way he touched his forehead with a forefinger, and his lips inaudibly shaped some word, always the same word, as I could see, though I could not hear it. By and by, when we were within a little distance of the lodge, I suggested that it might be wise to go back again, and, to my astonishment, she consented.

'Turn me round, Mr. Goldsmith. The air is a little chilly. It is very kind of you, Mr. Denham, to be so careful of an invalid. I am very much obliged to you, I am sure.'

There was a tone of mockery in this, as there was in most things she had said in my hearing, but I was getting used to her by this time, and paid no heed. As we turned slowly round I saw for the first time that Mary was approaching us, and I supposed she came to warn her patient that it might be unsafe to stay too long in the open air.

'Well,' said Goldsmith, bringing the chair

to a sudden standstill, 'that's the rummest start I ever knew in my life.'

'What is ?' her ladyship demanded, without making an effort to turn.

'Why, that is,' Goldsmith answered.

I made a gesture, and gave him a look to silence him, but Lady Worborough observed me.

'Come here, Mr. Goldsmith,' she said. 'What is it you describe as a rum start?'

He came round, staring in bewilderment from me to the advancing figure of Miss Delamere, and Lady Worborough's glance followed the direction of his eyes. I had never guessed until that moment that Mary was known to Goldsmith, or had any reason to guess it.

'What is it,' she demanded, 'that you find surprising in the appearance of that lady?'

'I don't know,' said Goldsmith, evidently bewildered by my gesture and, as I can well guess, by the expression of my face. 'I

don't know that there's anything surprising in the young lady. Only, she's the last person id the world I should ever have expected to see here.'

'Indeed!' said her ladyship, with set eyebrows and keen, glittering eyes. 'And why?'

Goldsmith spread his hands abroad with a deprecatory gesture.

'It's no affair of mine,' he said. 'If she's pleased to be here, and you like to have her here I've got dothing to say to it.'

'Are you mad?' she asked him scornfully.

'Dot much I ain't,' responded Goldsmith. 'If you choose to have Miss Delamere about you, of all the yug ladies in the world——'

'What?' she shrieked, turning madly round on me, and tearing at the rugs which were folded about her. The cry was so shrill and piercing, so full of rage and amazement and terror, that I seemed never to have

heard anything like it before from human lips. Mary came forward swiftly in alarm at this wild cry, and the wretched woman, who had released her hands, waved them threateningly at her with a mad repulsion.

'You will do yourself a mischief,' I cried, and made an effort to return the furs to their position. She repulsed me with an unexpected strength, and then clutching the rug tightly in her thin, ungloved hands, sat, wordless at first, glaring at the new-comer. Then her lips began to move over the white teeth clenched below them, and in a little while she spoke, with a self-repression which was no less than horrible to look at. The white teeth were never opened, and she had a look of thinking that she had them fast set in something she was eager to rend.

'So you are Miss Delamere,' she said. 'You have come here watching to see me die that you may marry my husband. That is the meaning of your Christian charity and goodness, is it? You have come down to

this great lonely house to poison me. Oh, you traitress! You wicked, smiling traitress. If I could get at you I would pull you into pieces with my hands.'

At first Mary was so bewildered at the cry, and so overwhelmed by this mad accusation, that she could answer nothing. In the very midst of its impossibility the accusation itself had a hideous kind of probability in it. Even to me, the fact that it could not in any distorted dream have entered my mind, carried no weight against it. It was hideous and unimaginable and beyond all conceivable madnesses untrue, and yet I really think that for the moment it struck as heavily as if it had been truth itself.

'You must have been a very wicked woman, Lady Worborough,' said Mary, tremblingly, 'to think such thoughts. You cannot really think them. You do not really think them. John,' she stretched out her hands to me, and I took them in my own,

'do you think that she can really believe a thing like that of me—of anybody?'

'You shall take nothing from the house,' said Lady Worborough, still speaking with her teeth clenched together, and the same dreadful set expression of her rage. 'You shall not go from here until everything you have is searched. We shall find poisons, and there is a law to punish you. Oh, you wicked, wicked, smiling traitress!'

'What are you talking about?' said Goldsmith. 'Nobody wants to poisod you.'

'Are you in the plot?' she demanded, turning her eyes upon him.

'Yes,' said Goldsmith. 'I suppose I'm in about as much as there is of it. You'd better get id out of the cold at odce. You'll be catching your death if you don't, and thed there'll be no need for anybody to poisod you. Put that rug up, and let me wheel you into the house.'

Goldsmith's stolid indifference did something towards calming the rest of us. His

disdain for her ladyship's suspicion was so real and unaffected that even she was a little disarmed by it. But she had at least a woman whom she recognised as a rival in her presence, and having never been easily placable in her own life was not likely to allow herself to be readily pacified here.

'You shall go,' she said, 'but you shall be searched before you go. You meant to poison me. Why else should you come here?'

'I never asked to come here,' Mary answered, stooping gently over her, her voice and manner in strangest contrast with those of the woman she addressed. 'I came because you asked me, because I thought you clung to me, and would rather have me near you than anybody else you knew. I came because I was sorry for you.'

Lady Worborough looked darkly at her without answering.

'Go on,' she said drily. 'Wheel me back to the house. You go before'—addressing

Mary. 'I won't lose sight of you. You meant to poison me.'

Goldsmith set the chair in motion, and Mary and I went on a mere trifle in advance, a foot or two only.

'Keep your eye upon her, Goldsmith,' said her ladyship. 'She wants to drop behind and run away.'

Mary paused for an instant and laid her hand upon the wheeled chaise in which the poor thing sat.

'I do not know,' she said with great gentleness, 'how you can have thoughts so foolish and so wicked. I will go, if you wish it, and if you wish it you may have everything belonging to me examined.'

Lady Worborough shot out a hand and clutched her by the wrist.

'Go on!' she cried to Goldsmith. 'I have her now. She won't get away from me!'

Mary laid her free hand upon the hand which held her, and I saw that her eyes filled suddenly with tears.

'Can't you believe, poor thing, that I was sorry for you—that I was very, very sorry for you?'

Her ladyship suddenly released her, with a curt command to go on in front again. One of Mary's tears had brimmed over and had fallen on her hand. She brushed it away hurriedly, as though it had scalded her, and folded herself tightly in her rugs. I offered my arm to Mary, seeing that she was in need of some support, and begged her not to give this monstrous accusation a moment's thought.

'I am not troubled by it,' she answered. 'How could I be? But I am very sorry for her.'

I said something about its being a poor reward for all her kindness, but, to my momentary amazement, she answered that it was not unnatural, and, turning round upon me, demanded if she had been in the wrong to come here. I told her very warmly that she had acted throughout the whole matter

like a saint, and after that we went on to the house without exchanging a word. I had known minutes before that the servants had heard Lady Worborough's first cry, for they had gathered in a knot at the hall door. Some of them were still standing there when we arrived. They were silent and respectful, but attentive. It was easy to see that they were curious as to the cause of the scream, and the set face of their mistress and the traces of Miss Delamere's tears must have been enough in themselves to confirm their natural suspicion of a scene. I dare say that I myself showed some sign of disturbance, though I did not think of this at the time. The invalid chair which we had brought with us from London was standing in the hall, and was ready on our arrival.

'Lift me out,' said her ladyship, 'and carry me to my rooms. Let that woman go on before, and watch her, so that she cannot run away.'

I conducted Mary up the stairs, and left

her at the door of Lady Worborough's apartments. We waited there in the corridor until the invalid was brought up in her chair, then the door was thrown open, and Mary entering before her she was carried into the first chamber.

'Come in, Mr. Denham,' she said to me in passing. 'Come in, Goldsmith. Stay here, all of you.'

Goldsmith had followed the chair upstairs, hat in hand, and now stood the most self-possessed of any one of us, waving the hat to and fro, and grinning, as if amused, though his smile was certainly a little uneasy.

'Send everybody here,' cried her ladyship to one of the servants when we had entered. 'Send Lord Worborough's lawyer here and all the servants. Go some of you to this woman's room, and bring down everything she brought into this house. Everything! Do you hear?'

'Lady Worborough,' I said, as quietly and

as firmly as I could, 'I will not permit you to place any indignity upon this lady.'

I turned upon Goldsmith and the servants and bade them leave the room, and, a little to my surprise, they obeyed me. I had been there before in the old lord's time as his guest, and in close intimacy with their present master. A good many of the old servants had been re-engaged, or had never actually been discharged, and one of the men who had assisted in carrying her ladyship upstairs remembered me. It was he who led the way, and the others followed him. Her ladyship raved, and commanded them to stay, and one of them did actually linger until I pushed him gently out from the room. When our accuser had gone quiet again I told her that since Miss Delamere was pleased, in face of this monstrous accusation, to have her belongings examined, I had no objection to offer. The examination, however, should be made decently and in order. It was in itself sufficiently shameful

and insulting, and nobody should witness it except they two, the doctor and the woman appointed to make the search. She, after a long battle, consenting to this, I rang for Lady Worborough's maid, and instructions were given to her to gather the whole of Miss Delamere's belongings, and to bring them to that room. Next I despatched a message for the doctor, and he and the maid arriving at almost the same instant, I left the four together.

CHAPTER XXXIX

I DO not remember to have been often so angry and so grieved at once as this scene had made me. I wished to cool myself, and walking straight into the open air, I encountered Goldsmith, who had lit a big cigar, and was now swaggering with it on the drive with an eye to the impression produced upon the domestics by his raiment and his jewellery.

'What's the meaning of all this, Bister Dedham?' said the little man. 'What's it all about?'

I asked him in return how he came to know Miss Delamere, and he beckoned me on one side.

'Mrs. Pole,' he said, 'set me to work to

find out whether her husband was at all in cobbunication with the lady. I'm one of those sort of med, Bister Dedham, who want to do a thing thoroughly when they do it at all, and I wasn't goig to have a lady watched udless I knew her myself. I went down and had a look at her. I went down two or three times and had a look at her. Charbing yug lady, ain't she? I think, you know, that Lord Worborough displayed uncobbon good taste.'

I told him that I did not wish to listen to his opinion upon that question.

'That's just as you like,' he answered, 'but I've got the opidiod all the same. I went dowd to see her, because I foud out that the fools had followed you instead of goig after Pole. But look here! What's the move? What's she want waiting on Lady Worborough? I suppose she wants to get a dotion of how long she'll last.'

Perhaps if I had been in less heat of temper than I was, I should not have an-

swered him at all; but being angry already, and freshly angered by his coarseness, I told him that Miss Delamere had nursed Lady Worborough simply and purely because she was a saint by nature.

'I ain't so green as that,' said Mr. Goldsmith. 'No, Bister Dedham, that cock won't fight; not with me, adyhow.'

It is not of much use to assault a man for being himself, but Goldsmith tempted me sorely. I moved away from him and walked up and down alone, aware that the servants were discussing the curious incidents of a quarter of an hour ago, and that they were consumed by curiosity. In a little while one of them emerged from the hall and came directly toward me. He was charged with a message from Miss Delamere, who desired at once to see me. I found her in a room neighbouring Lady Worborough's. The doctor was with her, and was standing over her in an attitude expressive of embarrassed sympathy.

'You must take me away at once,' she said agitatedly. 'I cannot stay here after what has happened.'

'I wonder that you submitted to such an indignity,' said the doctor. 'Without your express charge I would not have stood by to witness it. I have been thinking for a day or two past that Lady Worborough is not entirely responsible for her actions, and the last ten minutes has confirmed me.'

I asked if her ladyship gave any sign of being convinced of the falsehood of her supposition, and he answered, 'None.'

'We left her in a towering rage,' he said. 'She will do herself a mischief.'

It was obvious that the first and only thing was to move Mary with all possible expedition from the house. She herself had already given instructions for the packing of her baggage, and I left her for a moment only to arrange about my own, and to order a vehicle for the little hotel in the village, near the station. When I returned she had almost

altogether recovered her self-possession, and we waited quietly until we were informed that our joint orders had been fulfilled. Then we drove away. I thought it wisest to make no allusion to what had happened, and Mary herself spoke of it but once.

'I am very sorry for her,' she said then. 'It must be very horrible to live with such thoughts about one's fellow-creatures. I should never have chosen to nurse her, but it was not left to me to make the choice.'

The carriage set us down with our belongings at the little hotel, and we were shown into a comfortless, fireless room there. We had four hours to wait for the train, and when, in obedience to our instructions, a fire was lighted, the chimney smoked so badly that we had to throw open door and windows, and to sit, as it were, in the open air. Altogether it was a cheerless waiting. The hotel was very small, but it was at least four times bigger than there had been any reasonable ground for making it, and it was no more

homely than a desert. When the solitary waiter of the establishment, who looked as bored as Robinson Crusoe must have felt, walked about the unclothed corridor, he made such echoes there in the uninhabited and, I suppose, unfurnished solitudes about him, that I felt as if we were in some house of huge proportions, some Castle of Otranto, with a lonely giant footstep wandering up and down in it. The waiter was shy of strangers, and so unaccustomed to them that he was embarrassed by our arrival. There was absolutely nothing to read in the place, and neither of us was in the mood for conversation. So we waited dismally enough, and anything, however slight, that happened in the road on which our windows looked became an object of contemplation, and took an exaggerated interest. It was not in the least surprising, therefore, that we should both have caught early the sound of a horse's hoofs, going apparently at a headlong gallop. The noise travelled with the wind, and came nearer with

great rapidity. I stationed myself at the window, and to my considerable astonishment the doctor, followed closely by a groom, appeared in sight. The two checked their horses immediately below me, and I ran downstairs to meet them.

'I hardly have the cheek,' said the young doctor, speaking rather pantingly, 'to tell you what I have come for.' He had ridden like an unaccustomed horseman, and was blown by his exertions. 'One of the carriages is coming after us, and Lady Worborough wants Sister Constance to return. She doesn't merely want her to do it, but she's actually wild about it. You know enough about her to know what she's like, when she wants anything.'

'She has utterly thrown over that mad suspicion, then?' I asked.

'Completely, for the moment,' the doctor answered. 'She declares that Sister Constance is an angel, and that she herself is a fiend. She says that she never believed it

at all for an instant, but that she was tempted to say it simply because Sister Constance was so good and beautiful that she hated her for it and was jealous of her. That's a problem,' the young doctor added, 'for some men's reading, but it certainly isn't for mine.'

I could do no less than take these strange and unexpected tidings to Mary. The doctor mounted with me, but left me to tell the tale.

'I feel impertinent,' he said, when I had told it, 'in coming here at all. I should feel intolerably impertinent if I were to say a word to influence you, but all the same——'

He paused there, and made a little apologetic gesture as he checked himself.

'You think,' Mary asked him, 'that it will be better for me to go?'

'It will certainly be better for her,' the doctor answered. 'Of course you know that she makes a very violent display of any emotion. But she seemed quite dangerously agitated when I left her just now. If you could possibly persuade yourself——'

He paused once more, and made again that little gesture of apology with both hands.

'I will go,' Mary answered, 'if I can be of service.'

'You have always had an influence over her from the first,' the doctor answered. 'Pray don't think me impudent; I can't help saying how good you are.'

His eyes sparkled and his cheek flushed. He was obviously very much in earnest, and if he could have dared would have said more. He had not witnessed her sweet and noble patience all these weeks for nothing, and I had more than once suspected him of setting a higher value upon her than was quite consistent with his happiness. He never spoke a word, as far as I know, to indicate as much, but he had a worshipful way of following her about with his eyes which looked significant to me. Mary was a little embarrassed by his vivacity, but the sound of carriage-wheels came as a distraction, and we all three went

to the window. The young medico blushed at her silence and looked a trifle guilty, as if he felt that it reproved him.

We drove back to Worborough Court without delay, leaving instructions for our luggage to be sent on afterwards, and the doctor and the groom tore on ahead to carry the news of our return.

'Come with me to her ladyship's room when we arrive,' said Mary, as we were driven along. 'I am afraid of a scene, and your presence may help to keep her quiet.'

The servants who were present at our arrival received us with an alacrity which seemed to indicate to my mind that they knew something of the story. I supposed then, and actually learned afterwards, that Goldsmith had been talking. Mary had spent but a day within the house, but her sweet face and gentle ways had begun to tell even in that short time, as they did everywhere and always.

It is not an easy thing to analyse and

proportion one's affections. I have been fortunate enough, on my way to middle age, to have known and cared for a round half-dozen of lovable people, which I take to be a rather unusual allowance for one man. One's affections differ, of course, in kind, although they may be almost equal in intensity. My wife is absolutely aware of my opinion and sentiment, and shares it with me thoroughly and without a sign of jealousy—a rare and pleasing characteristic in a woman. So far as my experience carried me, I believed Mary Delamere to have been the best woman in the world. She never had need to search for affection, but found it offering itself everywhere spontaneously. I took —at this period especially—a tender pride in her, such as I suppose a brother feels for a sister. The pleased willingness of the servants was, I believe, more agreeable to me than to her. It rejoiced me to know that people loved her ; and when any phlegmatic creature, as sometimes happened,

appeared insensible to her charm and goodness, I was angered. In plain fact—Love me and love my Mary Delamere was a prime article in my creed, which I could hardly have sacrificed to please anybody.

The housekeeper awaited our arrival among others, and came forth with something of a kindly bustle, saying that her ladyship was especially anxious to see Sister Constance at once. We found the invalid lying where we had left her, and her face showed evident signs of recent tears. Her eyes were red and swollen, and her magnificent black hair all wildly disarranged. At the moment of our entrance she stretched out her arms imploringly towards Mary, with a strange moaning noise which I thought eloquent at once of joy and of repentance. Mary took the outstretched hands in her own and stooped a little over her, but the poor thing dragged her hysterically to her knees, and threw both arms about her, kissing her and crying over her in an almost frantic

way. This went on for a minute or two, and at first Mary made a gentle effort to disengage herself. Finding it useless, she submitted to these wild caresses, and, putting her own arms about the patient, drew her to her breast. At this Lady Worborough cried at first more violently than ever; but in a while the gentle embrace soothed her, and she lay there, heaping all manner of apology and protestation upon her recovered companion.

'You are an angel,' she said over and over again. 'An angel! an angel! an angel! How could you come back to me? If anybody had treated me in such a way, I should have killed her. I should have hated her for ever, and ever, and ever. Oh, my wicked heart! my wicked heart! What makes me hate people so? I have always hated people. I have always hated myself for doing it. Why does God make us to be so unhappy?'

She grew quieter by degrees, and Mary had a way with her which nobody else seemed to know the secret of.

'I shall never forget it,' said the unhappy woman. 'I shall never forgive myself. I shall carry the memory of it to my grave. I knew when I said it, it was a wicked lie. I had to say it. I have no power over my tongue when I am angry.'

I was slipping silently from the room, seeing that there was not the slightest necessity for my presence there, and thinking that she might be calmer in my absence, when she called me by name, and begged me not to go away. I was going, she said, because I hated her. Everybody hated her, except the one creature in the world who had most reason.

'And you don't hate me, dear?' she said, addressing Mary. 'I know you don't, although you have a right to.'

I besought her not to think that I bore her any hatred, and indeed, making all possible allowances for her explosive and capricious nature, her penitence and her affection for the woman she had wronged were so

sincere that she touched me nearly. That slow-burning, passionate heart of hers had not been subdued to penitence and apology without an awful inward struggle, and I knew it. She held out her hand to me very feebly, and I took it in my own.

'You don't hate me?' she asked. 'You love my husband, and you don't wish me dead?'

I could only answer that I was glad to know she cared, that I was extremely sorry for her, and that I thanked her with all my heart for what she had just said to Miss Delamere.

'But you hate me,' she insisted. 'You hate me. You must hate me.'

'My poor dear Lady Worborough,' I answered, 'why should anybody hate you now?'

'Ah!' she answered, with a great sigh, 'I suppose you can all afford to forgive me. I shan't trouble you long, I know. I've lied about that as well. I won't see Walter, mind

you. I'm not going to make things up with him. I'm not so weak as that yet, and never shall be. It was all his own fault. If he had beaten me as I deserved when I first broke out, we might have been happy always.'

There was no reply possible to this astonishing statement, though it might have been true enough to an exceptional sort of feminine human nature.

'You will over-excite yourself again,' Mary said gently, 'if you talk too much. Let us stay here together quite quietly, and say nothing. It will be better to go away, John, because Lady Worborough is really in need of quiet.'

'My name is Adelaide,' said her ladyship, with a touch of her habitual wilfulness and irony in the tone of her voice. Then, with a sudden change, 'Call me by it. Please do call me by it. *You* hate me, Mr. Denham, all the same. You wish me dead.'

'Go away, John,' said Mary decisively.

'I am sending him away,' she added, 'because you must not excite yourself—Adelaide.'

Her ladyship gave a little gasping sob in answer to the name, a suppressed cry of pleasure and of affection. The daylight was fading by this time, and the fire was already beginning to cast a reddish tinge upon objects prominent in the room, making the shadows deeper by contrast. A great expanse of quiet country lay visible beyond the pale oblong of the single window of the room, and the red glow of the fire made the landscape dim and ghostly. I stole out of the room on tiptoe, and as I turned to draw the door behind me, I saw the two clinging to each other.

CHAPTER XL

Pole's lawyer was beginning to be impatient, and I had not left Mary and Lady Worborough more than ten minutes at the outside when one of the servants came to me with a message from him. He was afraid of missing the up train, and was angered at the unnecessary delay. I told him as much as I cared to tell of what had happened, and of the momentary condition of affairs, and he consented to wait another twenty minutes before sending in a message. This, I thought, would give her ladyship time to collect herself, and in her softened humour it was quite possible that she might be willing to give less trouble than usual. It was plain enough that she had already kept the lawyers waiting

simply to assure them and herself of her own importance. Goldsmith had no other affairs likely to be as profitable as this, but the other man was differently situated, and had reasons for desiring to get away quickly.

At the end of the twenty minutes a servant was despatched with a respectfully worded message. Mary herself returned with the answer. Lady Worborough, after the excitement of the day, had grown alarmingly faint and weak, and had just fallen asleep. She did not think it advisable to awake her. It was certain that most healthy people would have found the wild excitement into which she had been plunged more than a little trying, and to an invalid as she was the day was certain to have been really dangerous. The lawyer hum'd and hah'd, but finally resigned himself, and sat down to write a lengthy letter of instruction to his staff. Mary went back quietly to her patient, and the hours went by in great dulness. I myself should have returned to town by the late

train, and was indeed prepared to do so, but for an encounter with the doctor, who came with a face of great gravity to consult me.

'I have just been to see her ladyship,' he said. 'She had slept for an hour when she awoke, and frightened Sister Constance by her extreme languor and feebleness. I don't like the look of things at all, and I can't accept the responsibility of the case alone. I shall send a telegram to Dr. Mason detailing the symptoms and leaving it to him to come down if he thinks them sufficiently grave, and I shall wire to Exeter.' He mentioned the name of a well-known physician there, and added, 'He is almost as good as anybody, and he can get down here by the local train by midnight.'

'You think things really serious enough for this?' I asked him.

'I think things very serious indeed,' he answered. 'We have had two or three hours of almost uninterrupted raving, and she is not in a state to stand it.'

I decided at least to await the arrival of the physician from Exeter, and by the messenger who carried the doctor's telegram I sent a despatch to Clara, apprising her of my resolve and the reasons which inspired it.

The doctor, the two men of law, and I dined together, and made a grave party. Goldsmith had heard the news and showed more feeling than I had expected.

'I'll tell you what it is, gedtlemen,' said Goldsmith, looking from one to the other of us. 'This is neither more nor less thad a judgment. That's what it is. A judgment. You may think it's only a coidcidence, but that ain't my way of looking at it.' The doctor asked him what he meant. 'You don't know the story?' said Goldsmith. 'Well, it ain't ady business of mine to tell it to you. Bister Dedham knows the story, and he understads what I'm talking about.'

I understood more than that. I comprehended perfectly Mr. Goldsmith's unwillingness to make anything but a veiled allusion

to that history in the presence of a respectable member of his own profession. Pole's lawyer would certainly have refused to sit at the same table with him had he been aware of the facts of that strange episode. I was not proud of Mr. Goldsmith's society myself, but I could not very well evade it at the time. I occupied myself for a while by thinking what that eminently respectable practitioner would say and do if I should unveil Goldsmith's secret to him then and there. When, after dinner, Goldsmith buttonholed me apart and started anew his theory that Lady Worborough's disaster was a judgment, I had been thinking so warmly of his scoundrelly participation in her terrible plot that I felt constrained to ask him to address me as rarely as possible.

'It's pretty bitter on a cove,' said Goldsmith; 'you'd have done it yourself if you'd had that womad standig over you.'

He went away, however, and even seemed a little depressed by my disapproval.

The doctor spent most of his time in her ladyship's apartments. She had been got to bed, and was now lying there in a state of marked prostration. I saw him only once before midnight, and then his looks were so sombre and his words so few that I was certain he thought the aspect of the case to be growing graver. Mary, during these hours, I did not see at all, for she remained constantly in attendance upon her patient. It was half an hour after midnight when the physician from Exeter arrived. I think he was the most reserved and guarded person I had ever met. He refused to commit himself to any opinion, hopeful or despairing. He did not even say that her ladyship's position was critical, but simply decided to wait and watch. On this unsatisfactory no-verdict I went to bed, but I found myself unable to sleep, and after tossing to and fro for a couple of hours I got up again and partly dressed myself. The materials for a fire lay ready in the grate. I set a light to them, and

wrapping myself snugly in a dressing-gown, sat staring at the blaze, and allowed my thoughts to wander where they would. They never wandered far from Lady Worborough, and those who were most intimately about her. I thought a good deal of that striking coincidence which Goldsmith regarded as evidence of a judgment. The woman whose body had been passed off as her own, and whom she had pretended to identify as herself, had been injured in the same manner, and had been carried to the same hospital. But I am not a believer in miraculous interpositions of that kind.

I had brought no books with me, and time crawled so slowly, and my own thoughts grew so dreary, that at last I decided to steal into the library, which was at the far end of the corridor in which my bedroom was situated. Lady Worborough's apartments were about midway. I lit a candle, and looking out, saw the doctor in the act of leaving his patient's room. The light I

carried attracted his attention, and he moved towards me. We met half-way, and he looked graver and more anxious than ever.

'The pulse is feebler,' he said; 'the temperature is lower. I don't like things at all.'

'What does your colleague say?' I asked.

'He is reserved, but he doesn't look confident. I am inclined to think he will wire for Mason.'

I told him of my inability to sleep, and asked him to let me know if the change became more marked. He promised this, and I went on to the library. Having secured a book or two there, I returned to my chamber and sat down to read, with such excellent effect that when I had gone steadily through a dozen pages, I had not the remotest idea of the meaning of a single phrase. I knew that I had been reading diligently, but my mind was busy with other things, and refused to take cognisance of the message the eyes brought it. Having tried again, and having,

by dint of resolution, fastened my mind to the first paragraph, I found myself at the end of the third page, in the same position as before. So I gave up the effort, and my mind went wandering again in the mazes of fantastic waking dreams. I came out of them once to replenish the fire, and again when my candles flickered in the sockets and went out. The room I sat in was cosy and homelike enough, and the fire gave a light which would have been clear enough to read by if I had been so minded. But I felt eerie and alone, and the sense of the likelihood of approaching death laid a chill upon my heart. The shadow feared of men seemed in the house already, and touched me where I sat.

Suddenly I heard a cautious footstep in the corridor, and a light tap upon my door. It was the doctor.

'There is no doubt now,' he whispered. 'She is sinking.'

'Is she conscious?' I asked.

'She is conscious,' he answered, 'but she is suffering from what we call aphasia. She has tried several times to speak, but she cannot use the words she wants. Her phrases are unintelligible.'

I told him that Lord Worborough ought, with as little delay as possible, to be informed of her condition. The local physician would know the country, and could tell us how best to despatch a telegram to town. The young doctor went back to consult him on this theme, and returned with the message that a man was all night on duty at the railway station, and would probably be able to despatch a message. I had assuredly nothing better to do, and I decided on going there myself. I completed my toilet and set out. One of the servants offered to provide me with a lantern, and I went round to the stables with him to secure it. The night was pitch dark, and so absolutely without a sound that more than once between the house and the lodge I felt impelled to pause and

listen. The silence hummed in my ears, and I was glad to break it by the noise of my own footsteps. The gates were closed, and I had to awake the lodge-keeper, who came down in a state of great alarm. When I had told him my errand he was eager to take it upon himself, but I knew the road as well as he, and declined his services. It was better to be walking on even in that monotonous unchanging little circle of light with the dense black of the night about me, than to be doing nothing, and sitting in the house with that grim presence growing tangible.

The man at the railway station had nothing to do but to signal the coming and going of luggage trains, and to adjust a point or two. He had his telegraphic signal, of course, in the box with him, but that was of no avail. The instrument used for the transmission of messages was locked up in the station. So far as the man knew, the station-master was the only person who knew how

to work it. There was nothing for it therefore but to awaken that functionary, and to trust his respect for the great house to secure his good will and assistance. I got his address from the pointsman and went out in search of him. I lost my way for a while, and went stumbling about the village without finding a creature of whom I could inquire, until at last I lighted upon a man with a cart, who gave me the necessary information.

When I had found the station-master he was extremely civil and obliging, and eager to be of service. We went down to the station together, and he signalled for a long time without securing an answer. At last, when we were almost on the point of despair, the gong set up a great clanging, and we knew that we had secured communication. Five minutes later I was back in the dark again, walking towards the Court. The station-master had informed me that if his lordship got the telegram within an hour he

could secure a train as far as Bristol, could there take up another after an hour and a half's waiting, and could so reach the village three hours earlier than by the express. I had tacked this information to my message, and was certain that Pole would act upon it if he received it in time. I felt very strongly that if it were possible he ought to see his wife before she took leave of the world. Death clears all scores, and on his side there had, all things considered, been but little rancour. What there might be, I knew him well enough to know, would be buried now for ever.

I was more than two hours away, and it was still pitch dark when I returned. There was no marked further change in Lady Worborough's condition, but her attendants thought her just a little feebler, and had no hope at all that she would rally. Mary, so the young doctor told me, was sitting at her bedside, and for hours past the dying woman had been holding her by the hand.

'That's a curious little bit of heroism and endurance, in its way,' he said. 'Did you ever try to sit for hours in one position? It's a great task. At times, it's something of a torture. It's one of those things that women will do. She may have to put up with hours more of it.'

The night crawled on wearily, with its silent stealthy comings and goings, its brief whispered colloquies, its monotonous questions and replies.

'Anything as yet?'

'Nothing.'

Sometimes the mere lifting of the eyebrows gave the question, and a grave negative sign of the head the answer. It seemed as if the dawn would never break, but after interminable waiting the windows began to show a ghastly gray, and lightened slowly, until at last the world was awake again. The dull, windless dawn was in keeping with the thoughts which filled me. The sky and the landscape that brooded under it

looked alike cold and desolate, and there was a gloom upon the day. There is a mysterious tie between men and nature at such times, which makes her seem to deride or sympathise with our moods as a sentient thing might. All the while poor Lady Worborough lay slowly dying, and the woman she had plotted to shame and agonise sat by her like some pitying angel, nursing her hand, and soothing her last moments by forgiveness.

Somewhere between eight and nine o'clock a telegram came from Pole announcing that he had started by the train indicated in my message, and was bringing Dr. Mason with him. I communicated this to the doctors, and asked if there would be time, in their judgment, for him to reach us before the end came. They thought so, but had no certainty in their opinion.

The elderly lawyer was either an early riser by habit, or was out at an unusual hour that morning. I told him the news, and he received it with a grave tranquillity.

'It is better so,' he said.

An hour or two later the housekeeper informed me that Goldsmith had shed tears on learning that the end was now regarded as inevitable. He did not appear at breakfast, and I met him in the shrubbery, red-eyed and miserable. He came to me with no attempt to conceal his emotion, and without an atom of resentment, or even of memory, for our interview of last night. He was not sensitive to the opinion of others, and, except by actual violence, it did not seem easy to incense him.

'I was very fond of her,' he said brokenly. 'She was hard to get along with, and she had her faults, like the rest of us. But she was kind to me, very kind once, when I wanted it badly.'

And so even she had her mourner, and had enlisted the affection of one heart at least, and kept it, though she might have won and kept others better worth the having.

I lingered as long as I dared before going down to meet Pole at the station, in order that I might be able to carry to him the latest intelligence. Outside the railway station I found quite a crowd of people. I suspect that the station-master had divulged the contents of Pole's telegram, which was not a very serious offence in the circumstances. The people were all quiet and expectant, and parted on either side to make a lane for the carriage. One or two of the villagers, whom I had known on earlier visits, came forward and made inquiries. By and by came the signal for the train, then the train itself. Then Pole, followed by Mason.

'What is the news?' he asked me.

'I think,' I answered, 'that you will be in time to see her.'

'Has she expressed a wish to see me?' he demanded.

I had to answer in the negative, but I could tell him that she was strangely softened,

and that there was some hope of a reconciliation even at this late hour. We entered the carriage and drove away amid the silent salutations of the village road, and I told the story of Lady Worborough's outbreak. There was no need for silence in Mason's presence, for he knew the whole history already, and I had made Pole aware of his knowledge of it. The narrative shocked one of my listeners painfully, though I slid past the indignity of the search without a word, and did my best to emphasise the completeness of the retractation and apology.

'Ah, well!' said Mason, with an aspect of relief, 'I am glad that the thing was not of my doing. I allowed Lady Worborough to come down here, and I was afraid that I might have acted like a fool. I understand it now, and it takes a great weight from my mind.'

I knew so well what happened afterwards from Pole himself and from Mary's account of it to Clara, that I can tell the story of the

scene almost as if I had witnessed it. Mason told me something of it too, though he was very brusque and brief, not caring, I think, to trust himself to too prolonged a narrative. The dying woman was told of her husband's presence in the house, and was asked if she would see him. At first she made no sign at all, but lay looking straight before her. Mary said that the hand she held trembled piteously at the question. It was repeated to her with much gentleness, and turning her eyes round upon the doctor she signalled 'Yes.' The gesture of the head was faint, but its meaning was obvious. Pole was shown into the room, and his wife looked towards him with what was construed into a glance of appeal and supplication. She was partly propped up with pillows, and her left hand lay upon the coverlid. Mary still held the other.

Lady Worborough looked from Pole's face to her own disengaged hand once or twice, and made a feeble motion of the hand itself.

Pole read this sign and took it in both his own. Mary rose and tried gently to disengage herself from the grasp which held her, but it tightened so decisively, and with a force which was so considerably greater than she could have expected, that she resumed her place.

The dying woman tried to speak, and did utter one or two words indistinctly, but they had no meaning to her hearers. She lay with closed eyes for a while after this failure, and both her husband and Mary felt a change in her hands, a tenseness which at first they thought indicated some spasm of great pain, though they knew only a second or two later that she was but making one final effort of that indomitable will. She quivered in her passionate desire to find the word. She found it and she spoke it, the worthiest she ever spoke, and the last.

'Forgive.'

Pole told her that he forgave her everything, fully and freely, as he hoped that his

own misdeeds might be forgiven. He begged her that if he had wronged her in any way she would pardon him as truly. The effort it had cost her to find the word had almost exhausted her, and they feared that every breath she drew would be her last. But she heard and understood, and for a moment a smile flickered faintly upon her face. Then a most strange and pathetic thing happened. The feeble hands drew the hands they held nearer to each other across the coverlid, and when they touched released them, and lay lax in death above them.

So I may say of her truly that nothing in her life became her like the leaving of it.

CHAPTER XLI

A ROYAL master of fiction laid it down as an axiom that when everybody can tell how a story will end, the story is ended. Here, for the rounding of this history, there remain but two or three things to tell. Mary and I returned to town together that same day, and Clara nursed her for a day or two with great assiduity, for now that the strain was over she proved quite overwrought. She was soon herself again, however, and we fell into our own ways of life at home, with some few differences. Pole had never once crossed my threshold since my marriage, and his reason for absence had been understood all along. He came for the first time about six weeks after Lady Worborough's funeral. He

was serious at first, but he had always been a man to whom affectation of any sort was intolerable and hateful, and when in the course of our talk we happened to strike a comic fancy, he had one of his old bright and charming smiles in readiness for it. His troubles had aged him, and, young as he was, there was a touch of gray about his hair. The attitude of his mind had grown habitually serious, but he was not at all the man to cling to a departing shadow.

'I don't know,' he said, 'whether I have acted properly in coming here so soon. I have been guided by you so often that, if you will allow me, I will take your advice once more. Mary is still staying with you?'

'Still,' I answered, 'and will stay, until the only person who has a right to take her away shall come to do it. I have been looking for you for days past.'

'That sounds,' he said, 'like approval.'

'It ought to sound,' I answered him, 'like complete approval. The fact is that,

if you liked to think so, your position for a time might be embarrassing and delicate. If you do not choose to trouble yourself at all about it, it may grow natural in a day.'

Clara, who was of course aware of his presence in the house, came in at this juncture to welcome him. She stayed but for a moment or two, and on retiring—

'Tea will be ready in five minutes. You will come up and join us, John, and bring Lord Worborough with you.'

This indicated clearly enough another opinion on our side, and we followed Clara upstairs. Pole glanced about the room, but Mary was not there. He looked disappointed, and even a little nervous, but almost immediately she entered. They shook hands and we all sat down together, Clara talking at first with a rather forced vivacity. She soon conquered this, however, and the ice once being broken, we got on without further trouble. When we had taken tea, Clara moved into the adjoining room and sat down

to the piano. I also sauntered through the folding-doors and stood to listen to her playing. It was by no means as firm as usual, and I was not long in discovering that she was crying softly to herself. But I knew that her tears were very far from being unhappy, and feigned to take no notice. In about an hour Pole said his good-byes and went away. He came again, and continued to come, not half as often as I should have been glad to see him, or I suppose a twentieth part as often as he would really have cared to call.

I remember that whilst these visits were going on, and whilst indeed they were comparatively new, Clara and Mary and I dined together with that genial old Dr. Fish, of whom I have once or twice found it necessary to make mention in the course of my story. I met at his table the lady of the poor dear Hottentots. It appeared that they had changed their allegiance, and the poor dear Cypriotes were now in charge, after a

fashion as mysterious as that of their predecessors. She hinted to me after dinner that Lord Worborough's visits were just a little —now didn't I think so? Were they quite? —Didn't I fancy, now, that they were rather premature? Did I think that they were absolutely and entirely?—well, she might say delicate?

'Dear madam,' I responded, 'Lord Worborough and Miss Delamere suffered horribly as the result of a wicked and shameful plot. They behaved throughout like persons of delicacy and honour, and they are acting now like people of common-sense. It was I who took upon myself to advise Lord Worborough, and his visits to my house are at my invitation.'

Whether the general Mrs. Grundy had more to say upon the question I never learned, and certainly never took the trouble to inquire. This particular lady was more abashed than I had meant her to be. She abdicated from her proprietorship of the poor

dear Cypriotes for the rest of that evening, and went away early, with effusive 'my dearings' and handshakings for Miss Delamere.

When we had quite settled down to the new order of things, and when that sorrowful past had at last sunk from the surface of our lives, we made a very happy quartette. From my dignified height of married man, I looked upon the two dearest friends I had in the world with a profound satisfaction and thanksgiving. Clara, from her extra elevation of dignity as married woman, surveyed them with a pleasure as genuine as my own. The ghastly dead past must have floated up sometimes in their remembrance, as it did in ours, but the great equal stream of time went on and drowned it deeper, hour by hour and day by day.

The haunted man, in his bargain with the ghost, lost all his memories of sorrow with the natural result we know of. It would be as sad to lose our memories of trouble as to lose our memories of joy. But we may all

thank God that joy grows brighter in the retrospection, and that sorrow fades.

It was about this time that I received an unexpected visit in my official room. Mr. Delamere turned up there, as distinguished, as well bred, as condescending, and urbane, as ever.

'My dear Denham,' he said, 'I have called upon you with regard to an affair of the utmost delicacy. I have never been able to refrain from a certain feeling of contempt for those people who make a lavish display of the emotions. I have, in fact, now in preparation for the press, a lecture delivered some years ago on the Control of the Emotions as a Sign of the Perfected Man.'

I thought within myself that the control of the emotions was no doubt an admirable thing, but that the aspect of power in that direction might be less estimable where there were no emotions to control. But I held my tongue, and Mr. Delamere streamed on, calm, urbane, forgiving.

'I have never,' he pursued, 'closed my eyes to the fact that your charming wife and yourself have of late considerably influenced the career, the character, and the resolutions of my child. I do not inquire whether her resolutions to divide her life from mine were, or were not, arrived at as a result of that undoubted influence. I even applaud that fineness of sentiment, that high sense of honour in my daughter, which led her to sacrifice the instincts and the cherished associations of a lifetime. I presume that the instincts were inherited, and I cannot, and I do not, blame Mary for acting upon a sentiment which I have found only too considerably active in my own career. She has an erroneous conception of the circumstances of the case. But I authorise you to inform her—I should rather say, perhaps, that I beg you to inform her, that I applaud her feeling, but that I consider that she has by this time more than sufficiently justified her own position. I come to you because I cannot again endure

to be encountered with coldness by my daughter. I appeal to you as a man of honour to present my case as I have stated it. It is possible,' he added, with a touch of dignified pathos which would have imposed upon me completely in the early days of my acquaintance with him, 'it is possible that my very whereabouts may be unknown to her. You will find it indicated here.'

With this he produced a card, and laid it delicately upon the table, like an artist and a gentleman. He took up his hat like an artist and a gentleman—he really had the most perfect and finished manner I have ever known—and rose to go. I promised that I would do my best, and told him I was certain that Mary would be the happier for the reconciliation. He thanked me, and went away.

I took the message home that evening, and, to be brief, Mary consented very willingly to call upon him, and next morning paid him a visit. As a result of this I wrote to him saying that she would continue her residence

with Clara for some little time to come, and asking him to visit her and us as often as he pleased. I expressed my joy at the reconciliation, and made myself a great deal more agreeable on paper than I felt internally towards him.

Sebastian had been upon our household list almost from the beginning, and it was like old times to hear him and Delamere, when they met together, orating one at another with all their original solemnity. Sebastian had turned to architecture, and had a theory that the reformation of the world from the great doctrine of ugliness was more easily to be effected in that direction than any other.

'The very streets of London strangle and suffocate the wayfarer,' he would say. 'The dull, eternal, unbroken straight line wearies the soul with its infinite monotony of repetition. The poisonous fallacy of utility has been the death of beauty.'

I suspect that he wrote these things down

and committed them to memory, unless when they came freshly from the paternal pump spout and he re-poured them.

'I speak of the fallacy of utility, and I protest that I find no exaggeration in the phrase. The first essential in a thing is that it shall not be hideous. The second essential in given cases is that it shall be useful. Because you can pack more squares or oblongs than circles or ovals into a given space we sit in these soul-freezing rooms of ours, among flat walls and ceilings.'

Pole was there, and asked him if he wouldn't keep the floors level, if only as a concession. Not to speak it unkindly, Sebastian had grown more tolerant of Pole's form of humour since the latter had come in for a great fortune and a peerage. I dare say that was true of many people, and I am not disposed to be severe on Jones. He smiled allowingly, and proceeded with the development of his theory.

'It is very heartbreaking,' he said at last,

'but nobody appears to care much. I dined last night with a contractor. One meets such people now and then. He jeered at my contention in a way which I felt to be quite tasteless and almost personally injurious. He positively told me that I need only exceed my average allowance of wine at dinner, and "top up"—that was the contractor's expression—with a dose of Old Tom and hot water, in order to see the lines of any street arranged in as varied a pattern as I could desire. Of course that closed the conversation. One can't talk with such people. They veil themselves in their own coarse contempt against the light of thoughts beyond their understanding.'

But Sebastian was even more enjoyable on one occasion when only Pole and I were present. It appeared that Delamere and he had clubbed together, and had resolved, for the sake of society, to dine in common when not otherwise engaged.

'And do you know,' said Jones, 'I begin

to suspect Delamere of being a trifle selfish in an almost unbelievable direction. We have dined together, I should suppose, since this compact was entered upon, not fewer than a score of times. Now it happens that the man who caters for us at the Albany, though otherwise excellent, is possessed of but little resource or variety with respect to dessert. He has always served up a mere half-dozen of a kind of macaroon of which I am—one confesses to this kind of trifle with no shame—particularly fond. I appropriated them, of course, with Delamere's express consent, on the first evening. They became, so to speak, my property, and I looked forward to them naturally as the close of my repast. Now, last night, and positively also the night before, Delamere deliberately, and with obvious intention, appropriated them all.'

Pole said that this was simply brutal, and Sebastian thought the term too strong. Really, he thought it unwarrantably strong. Pole was sorry, but regretted that he could

not modify it, and Sebastian expressed his regret at having told the story. He valued Delamere, and had no wish to give his friends a poor opinion of him. For his own part, he was contented to describe the act as an unexpected idiosyncrasy.

I delighted in all this, not merely because it was so charming in itself, but because it showed that Pole still had a laugh left in him, and because he had had a more relishing perception by nature of the fun than I had.

Nothing was said of the one event which we all regarded as inevitable. Clara was full of wonder as to when the news was coming. It came out at length that Pole and Mary had decided between themselves to wait a year, and that they had resolved upon a very quiet wedding. To me, the time seemed to pass swiftly, and I look back to it now, or at least to all but the earliest months of it, as the happiest of my life. There are few men who can boast of nine months so free from care, so tranquilly, uneventfully hopeful

and content. To see the patient look of settled resignation fade from Mary's face, and to see the dawn of positive happiness in it, was in itself a joy which any man might envy. To see the same change in Pole, to watch the quiet hearty humour of the man growing more supple and more at home again within him day by day, was another and an equal pleasure. I thought Pole the best fellow in the world. Almost everybody has that opinion about somebody, but I am prepared to this hour to back my man, and if anybody should prove so fortunate as to win against me I shall never know it, and the winner will have a friend who is indeed worthy of his best affection.

I am getting very near the end now, and have little more to tell. But when I sat, revolving this old history in my mind a year ago, and determining to write it, I fixed upon a title for the story, as if it had been a novel. I decided to call it 'The Weaker Vessel'; and that, if ever it should see the light of

publicity, is the name it ought to bear. The episode, the remembrance of which decided me upon that title, has still to be told. The title itself has passed into a sort of byword between my wife and me, and we have grown familiar with the name.

It was only a week before the wedding when Clara the younger had been conducted, on a chill but sunshiny day, upon a walk by her nurse. This same Clara the younger has filled but a little place in these pages, though she was known to all hands aboard the family craft as commanderess-in-chief. We were all standing at the drawing-room windows at home, chatting and looking out on the fine bright weather—Clara, Mary, Pole, myself, and Delamere. Clara, Delamere, and myself were at one window, Pole and Mary at the other. The little Clara was suddenly discerned in the street, toddling forward with outstretched hands and somewhat uncertain footsteps, treating the ridges of frozen mud as if they were half her own

height. She had evidently escaped for the moment from her nurse, who was scudding forward in a stooping posture, either to pick her up or to sustain her footsteps, when a wildly driven hansom came tearing round the corner and dashed in between them. The child was absolutely touched by the wheel, and thrown forward. The nurse girl, recoiling with a shriek, tripped and sat down upon the roadway. By a happy wonder, neither child nor nurse received a hurt worth mentioning, but for the moment my heart was in my mouth, and by the time that Pole and I had torn downstairs together, got the hall door open, and discovered the pair to be undamaged, I was sick and faint.

I carried the little creature, who was not at all alarmed by her tumble, into the drawing-room, and there was Mary in an arm-chair in a state of perfect collapse. She had fainted clean away. There was a mighty hubbub for a moment, but we all calmed down, and in half an hour's time Mary herself, with a rather

white face and tremulous manner, apologised for her weakness. She had imagined that both the girl and the child had been run over.

Delamere was very gorgeous to behold and listen to as he expatiated upon this incident, and turning to Pole, with his courtly and condescending grace, he said,

'You must have pity on the weaker vessel.'

An hour later, when Mary had quite recovered, and Pole and I were alone together, he delivered his mind of the thoughts which this utterance awoke in him.

'Jack, you heard Delamere speak just now about the weaker vessel.'

I remarked that I had noticed the phrase, and that I had had some fancies about it.

'It set me thinking,' said Pole. 'The weaker vessel! In all things worth while to be strong in, much the stronger vessel, to my mind. How dares that hollow sham to condescend to a creature so infinitely his superior? Did *she* stoop to touch money dishonourably borrowed? And what did I

do? Is it any vanity to say to you, who know her as well almost as I do, that she loves me? Is it vanity to suppose that she felt the separation as bitterly as I did? I know she did, Jack. I know the shame of being public talk in such a business made that sensitive heart bleed many and many a time. And whilst I was away in Paris, gambling, and racketing, and hating my kind, and eating the husks the swine do eat, she was tending her sick and her poor, and strengthening her soul with holy thought and pious living. Jack, my lad, they're better than we are. They're purer and stronger, and more patient to endure.'

He was not talkative for a long time after this outburst, but several times in the course of the afternoon I heard him muttering to himself, 'The Weaker Vessel!' in a tone of wrathful incredulity.

In the old tales the hero and the heroine always married and lived happily ever afterwards, and this strange episode in my own

career shall end as so many other stories have ended—to the sound of wedding bells. Their happy riot has long since sunk into silence; but I know that so far peace and honoured usefulness and deep content follow their music. The wedding was a very quiet affair indeed, as it was long since arranged it should be. There were not more than half a dozen people present at it as spectators. Delamere gave away the bride, and Sebastian was there in his character of friend of the family. Sebastian, by the way, brought the only strange lady present. He had so far relented from his theory of beauty and utility as to sacrifice himself at the shrine of a conspicuously plain and outrageously dollared young woman who came from Oleoville, Pa. She was related to the Dodges there, and, as everybody knows, the Dodges are financially big fish even among the biggest.

I was particularly pleased to get a visit from MacIlray on the very morning of the wedding, as I was in the act of dressing for

the ceremony. I saw him in my dressing-room for an instant and he was pleasantly excited by the news I had to give him.

'Ah'm glad,' said MacIlray, 'that the good lad is going to be happy. I'll tell ye! Ef I may be permitted, I'll just get away to the church, and have a look at the ceremony from the gallery.'

He made his way thither, and when the wedding was over and the handshakings and congratulations were all over likewise, and the wedded pair had driven away, I found him waiting at the church door for me. There was no wedding breakfast, for Pole had too active a horror of the possibilities of Delamere's eloquence on such an occasion to endure more than the bare prospect of it. I know this to have been the working factor in his mind, and in all seriousness I am not disposed to be surprised at his decision.

I should have been glad to meet MacIlray at any time, for I had learned to have a

genuine regard for him. But with Pole and Mary gone I felt lonely and a little dispirited, and he came doubly welcome. We sat and talked about the chase in Paris, and I told him something of what had happened since. Then the conversation languished for a time, until his old unconscious watch-cry broke the silence. It sounded to me, in an odd way, as if there were a philosophy in it, as if it even reconciled discrepancies and expressed a sort of wisdom of generality in little.

'Ay, ay, Denham,' said MacIlray. 'Ay, ay, lad! Ay, ay!'

THE END

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